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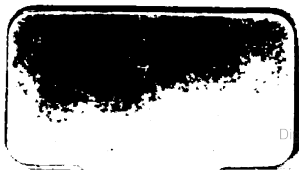
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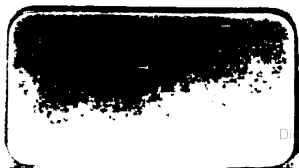
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A WOMAN OF CHARACTER

A WOMAN OF CHARACTER

A NOVEL

BY

JAMES BLYTH

AUTHOR OF 'JUICY JOE,' 'CELIBATE SARAH'
'DEBORAH'S LIFE,' 'THE SAME CLAY'
'AMAZEMENT,' ETC. ETC.

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CHAPTER I

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

THERE had been no conversation between the one middle-aged man and the two young men during the walk from the south pier to the Dominion Hotel. Even when the three pushed through the round-swinging doors of the great hall, and the senior went off to bed, only one remark passed between them. 'I wish,' said Robert Bear, 'that you would avoid being seen associating with a woman of that class.'

He nodded his head in the uncouth, abrupt, sullen fashion which was characteristic of the man, and without any form of 'good-night,' he left his nephews by marriage to their own devices.

It was the night of the first Monday in the third week of August in the year 189—, and Trawlhaven had been *en fête* throughout the day. The visitors' season of the east-coast seaside resort was at its height, and the annual regatta had been held in the roads during the day, followed by fireworks and the vulgar

fatuity of one of those functions which provincial people misname carnivals, by virtue of the profuse distribution of filthy bits of paper, legalised insanitary missiles, sold as 'confetti.'

Robert Bear had run down from Friday to Tuesday to see how his wife's sister's sons, Ralph D'Esterre and Cradock D'Esterre, were conducting themselves at the great hotel. His wife, Lavinia, was a most kind and tender-hearted woman, and since Robert had attained vast wealth she did her best for the few members of her family who were left. When she married Robert in the year 1875, he was no more than a fairly wealthy spice-merchant with a modest office near Mincing Lane. Since then shrewd purchases of camphor and other wares of the kind had brought him into prominence in the city. Collaboration with a rising firm of Italian warehousemen, with an enormous export trade, had enabled him to extend his ventures, and on the night when he expressed his displeasure at the class of woman with whom he had seen his nephews in cheerful converse on the south pier at Trawlhaven, he might have written himself a millionaire twice over. He was a man of the middle height, with broad shoulders, upright carriage, and sturdy build. His head was large, bullet shaped, with a high, wide brow, dark eyes set far apart, a straight, blunt nose, small thick ears, rather coarse lips, a straight, small mouth, and a fine growth of red-gold hair, not only on his

head, but bristling abundantly all over his face. His beard was cut square, and occupied about a square foot of area. His teeth were large, but not prominent. They had a curious menacing effect when he smiled. He was fifty years of age, but scarcely looked it. The impression his appearance gave was one of power and repression. As soon as he spoke his brusque manner, his rough, hard voice, his total lack of tact in speech, did much to modify whatever favourable ideas of his character might have been gathered from his appearance. And yet knowledge of the man did not destroy a certain respect. If he was a boor, and he certainly was that, he was a respectable boor. There was strength in him. He would never have been suspected of doing a dirty action until he was found out. He was a professed Unitarian, and the mere fact that he had sufficient religious conviction to belong to such a sect gave him a reputation of being a serious man. No one, people thought, would call himself a Unitarian for the fun of the thing. He must be one by conviction, as he was certainly not by education. And it is something to have religious convictions in these days. The last thing which any one who knew him (as well as any one could know the man) would have suspected as an influence over his actions was passion. Despite his vigorous body, and the power of his eyes, there was a cold reserve about him, an atmosphere of almost ascetic restraint, which seemed to put the love of

women far from him—save, of course, such pale love as suffices for the average commonplace, respectable middle classes of suburban London and provincial towns.

He was not uncharitable in his way. He permitted his sweet-souled wife, Lavinia, to help her needy relatives freely. It was by his aid, and his aid alone, that Ralph D'Esterre had been able to qualify as an architect, and his younger brother, Cradock, as a barrister. He even seemed to have some liking for the young fellows—a liking which spoke well for him under the circumstances.

It was with his help that the two brothers were enabled to take a month's holiday at the Daneshire sea-port, for neither of them had as yet risen to any eminence in his profession. Indeed, but for their uncle's generous allowance they could not have lived in their modest London lodgings. He had given each of them a hundred-pound note for the holiday, and a hundred pounds is enough wherewith to make quite a splash at Trawlhaven. It was by his wife's request (the dear, good woman never realised that any one ever grew up, and fancied that Ralph and Cradock ought to be looked after for their own good) that he had spared himself two or three days from his office and his home interests to see if the young men were comfortable. Lavinia had not been to Trawlhaven for twenty years, and fancied that the old Royal was still the only possible hotel in the town. She did not know that

the luxurious Dominion was now open for two months only in the year, for such as would consent to pay its prices, and it would not have made her any happier if she had known the class of place where Robert found the two young fellows installed. She was an old-fashioned, early Victorian lady, carrying on the delicacy and nervous fancies and manners of the sixties into years when most folk had forgotten them or only remembered them with ridicule.

Up to the last night of his stay everything had gone off well. On the Saturday night, the night of his arrival, Robert had been content to stroll about the pier with his two pensioners in respectful attendance. He listened for a few minutes to the energetic efforts of the volunteer band, but for the most part walked backwards and forwards with a serene face and unnoticing eyes, sniffing in the breeze which was bringing in the scent of spindrift from the east. The Sunday was spent in a long walk, and in similar healthful and harmless recreation. Even the Monday, that day of giddy excitement for the town, passed without his observing that more than one smart-looking girl on the pier cast wistful eyes on the two young fellows with him—but most on Ralph.

When the last gun had been fired, the last swimming-match swum in the harbour, and the sun went in and the fireworks and the confetti came out, Robert retired to the hotel. Certainly he would have looked

an incongruous figure in the midst of the sixpenny crowd on the pier, now that the pretty shop-girls and the lodging-house maidens were free to take their pleasure and seek their youthful mates of the opposite sex. Trawlhaven boasts that it is far more 'select' than its rival and neighbour Easterby. Possibly the parlour-maids on the pier are better dressed than the housemaids on the Easterby sands. But to young fellows in search of amorous adventure there is not much difference between a pretty parlour-maid and a pretty housemaid, and sometimes the affectations of Trawlhaven annoy youth which is not ripe enough to find enjoyment in the humour of them. However that may be, whether the dainty frocks adorned the charms of visiting domestics or local 'young ladies,' Robert thought that the pier was no longer any place for him, and made his way off long before the real business of the night began—for what business could there be on a seaside-resort pier on a calm moonlight night but love-making?

'I shall see you in the morning if you come in after I've gone to bed,' said Robert, as he took his departure.

'Very well, uncle,' said Ralph. 'Thank God he's gone,' he said to Cradock when the sturdy figure passed through the exit. 'Did you see that dark girl with her hair cut short? She isn't exactly pretty, but by Jove she *has* got eyes on her, and she carries

herself like a thoroughbred. I believe she's game too. Come on, Crad. Let's see if we can find her down at the end.'

He took his brother's arm, and the two swung round with the *elan* of self-satisfied youth, and swaggered along the boards in pursuit of the lady with the eyes.

At this time Ralph D'Esterre must have been one of the handsomest men in England—that is, for those who admire the apathetic style. His face was perfect in feature. Not a curve but was pure and classic. Not a line but was a line of beauty. His eyes were large, and of a soft, appealing blue that is more often seen in a woman than a man. Indeed the general effect of his extreme beauty was rather feminine than masculine. He was a little below the middle height, but perfectly formed. His hair was a light wavy brown, his moustache pure gold. His lips absurdly feminine. His manner was cool and never eager. He walked, drove, sat, smoked, made love, anything you like, as if he really didn't care much about it, don't you know. No more apathetic male beauty ever charmed the hearts out of silly girls than this rather brainless specimen. Like Naples, he was a treat for the eyes. There were other similarities between the man and the town.

He had managed, with some difficulty, to pass his examinations, but the famous architect to whom he had been articled, made no secret of his opinion that

if young D'Esterre was to succeed in his profession, he would do so by means of his uncle's influence and not by means of his own ability.

Craddock was taller, bigger, coarser, and, if anything, sillier. But his fine limbs gave him a good show with such girls as were on Trawlhaven pier that night, and neither he nor Ralph had any doubt that they would be able to make the acquaintance of some fair damsel who would take pity on their loneliness in the midst of a shouting, reeking crowd. Craddock knew better than did his elder brother that he had no chance in life but in his uncle's kindness, for if he was unable to get a coronership or some sinecure for which his profession made him eligible, he would never earn a farthing in his life. He had been the butt of the Hardwick society on the few occasions on which he had ventured to attempt to obtain a hearing there. He was a fool. His chance lay in the fact that he knew it.

The two brothers had only come down themselves on the previous Thursday, and as yet they had not seen any girl who attracted them sufficiently to rouse either of them to make any advances. They were both a little *blasé*. If women will make pets of beauty-men, their sisters must suffer for the conceit which is artificially fostered in the creatures whom nature has already made vain enough. But they liked the spurious love-making which is the popular form of

amusement amongst youth and beauty by the sea-side. While Robert Bear had been with them they had kept their eyes open, for even if they did not get a chance that evening to make the acquaintance of some temporary lady-love, they might 'spot' their fancy and make a note of it for the time when they would be left alone together. And now dear uncle had gone home to bye-bye, and would be going up to town to-morrow, and Ralph had seen something 'tasty.'

'Come on, old boy!' said Cradock.

The pier was very full. Most of the better-class people who had paid their shilling during the day to watch the yacht-racing and the matches between the gunboats' cutters and local talent, had remained indoors after dinner and had not ventured on to the pier for the 'fête.' But the lower middle classes were rollicking along the promenade between the harbour and the deep sea in their riotous thousands.

The night in itself was very still. The mere waft of easterly breeze only served to make the August heat pleasant. A huge orange-tinted moon, a little past the full, was climbing out of the sea, making the steamers' smoke smear sombre, crêpe like, across the sky. The horizon, on which the moon sat perched for an instant, seemed as though it had been overlaid with a transparent film of beaten gold. As the moon's rays shot their spreading shaft from horizon to beach

the faint tremble of the water became visible. But for that it seemed an absolute calm. Out in the roads the gas-buoys winked insolently at the menace of the moon. The Starch lightship to the nor'-east shone red and gold at intervals. Far up amidst its splendid screen of trees, on the heights to the north, the high light swerved its rotating warning. The low light at the Hythe could not be seen from the pier. But just across the outer basin were the lamps of the fishmarket. At the inward end of the harbour and the pier a horrible mockery of nature's lamps banged, boomed, or fizzled. The yacht clubhouse beside the 'set piece' (a daring building which looked like a cross between a modern fort, a Chinese pagoda, a wattle-and-daub shed, and a Queen Anne bazaar) was aglow with electricity. Through the open windows came the popping of corks, the clink of glasses, the songs and shouts of jollification. An artist, whether for the eye or ear, might have rested on some elevated spot of the pier and revelled in the innumerable effects of light and sound. But down on the very planks it was a task to make one's way. The electric lamps threw the little girls' faces into shadow as soon as they were near enough to see. An eternal giggle rippled through the waves of the throng. At every step an unwary pedestrian received a mouthful of coloured paper which had been brushed up from the filth of the boards, from the

cigarette ashes, the pipe plugs, the spittle, the match ends, and stuffed back into the original receptacle for purposes of economy. It was native Trawlhaven now, and native Trawlhaven is thrifty. Native Trawlhaven cannot live without its visitors. But native Trawlhaven loathes and despises its visitors for all that. Here they were! Here in this legalised orgy of local humour. What? An open mouth. Fill it with filth. Hor! hor! hor! Here and there a big man passed quietly along. Native Trawlhaven was not going to interfere with him. He might retaliate. Even the D'Esterre brothers were too formidable-looking to be baited.

They strolled easily along, arm in arm, a little offended by the reek of cheap 'fags,' a little critical of the pungent bitter savour which now and again came over from the trawl market and made one doubt the freshness of all fish that ever swam.

'Rum place,' said Ralph. 'Pon my soul it's the only place where one ever sees a gal. I've looked everywhere in the town. But I'm hanged if there is any recognised resort there. But there are always some sporting-looking gals on the pier in the evening. Hey, Crad!'

'Most moral place I was ever in,' said Cradock. 'But there were a couple of nice little things at the Hippodrome on Thursday night. You didn't see 'em, did you?'

'No,' yawned Ralph. 'Well, we were too damn tired then to go fooling about. But where the devil is she?'

They had got almost to the end of the pier. The crowd was so thick that it was quite likely that the one fair daughter whom Ralph had discerned had been passed.

'She ain't exactly pretty you know, old man,' said Ralph. 'Oh, there she is. What a bally nuisance she's alone.'

'Oh, never mind me,' said Cradock. 'I'll go cruising round. There's sure to be something else worth speaking to.'

'No, hold on,' said Ralph. 'Hang it, I believe she's with that other lot. Look, that other gal and two men.'

Cradock followed the direction of his brother's eyes, and saw a short slim girl, or rather woman, standing talking eagerly to three well-dressed and decent-looking people. She had an active, wiry figure rather than a round, buxom, 'cuddlesome' shape. But there was an allurements in the way she held her shoulders and her back, an attraction in the pose of her thin-featured face as she curved her neck like some attentive bird. Her hair was dark, in the light it looked black, and was cut short; perhaps she had been ill. But she bore no other signs of illness. Her mouth was thin-lipped, and her cheeks were too flat and sunken. But there was that undefinable lure of personal femininity which has more influence than all

the perfect features in the world. She was the feminine sex incarnate, reptilian, feline, subtle. She breathed the mystery of concealment, that wondrous attraction which man has been fool enough to permit woman to arrogate to herself. If men wore petticoats and women trousers the whole relations of the sexes would be altered! Perhaps the suffragists will enact this change of costume when they are in power. If so, it will mean the apotheosis of man.

Quick to see, swift to act, the woman at whom the two young fellows were looking dismissed the people with whom she was speaking. She threw a glance of provocation at Ralph, and commenced to walk round the end of the pier in such a way that she would soon confront the brothers face to face. She was well dressed, and quietly. There was nothing in her appearance apart from her vital personality which could have justified any remark to her discredit. Yet Ralph and Cradock both felt assured that they had but to speak to her and she would not repulse their advances. I do not mean that they regarded her as a woman of ill fame, as a poor tragedy of life. But they looked on her as 'sport'—as an unknown country which hid possibilities of which as yet they knew nothing.

'Gad!' said Ralph. 'The little minx is coming to meet us. No, don't go, old boy. Let's see what she's made of together.'

They continued their walk, so that presently they met the girl for whom they looked face to face. She turned her eyes full on Ralph, hesitated in her stride, and smiled. Ralph raised his hat. 'Good evening,' he said.

'Oh,' said the woman, stopping, and still smiling, 'good evening. But I'm afraid I don't know you.'

'Does that matter?' said Ralph, laughing. 'Can't we get over that unfortunate fact? Permit me to introduce my brother, Mr. Cradock D'Esterre, Miss—er—Miss——'

At this the woman burst out laughing. 'Oh, my name's Fanny Butler,' said she. 'But isn't this a rather irregular introduction?'

'It isn't over yet,' laughed Ralph. 'Come on, Crad; do your duty, man. I don't know the lady yet.'

Cradock gathered his slow brains together. 'Oh, ah,' said he. 'Ha! ha! I beg pardon. Er—er—Miss—er—Fanny Butler, er—my brother, Ralph D'Esterre.'

'At the Dominion Hotel,' added Ralph. He had a touch of snobbishness which he often found useful. It was useful in this instance. The Dominion is a hotel which only those who need have little regard for expense should patronise. It is a huge building, with metropolitan comforts and luxuries, with three or four hundred bedrooms, and with a season which lasts barely two months. For the rest of the year the great mournful building stands majestic and deserted.

Necessarily those who frequent it during the two months of its yearly life have to pay for the privilege.

‘Oh, the Dominion,’ said Fanny. ‘Are you down for long?’

‘About a fortnight or so, I hope,’ said Ralph. ‘But you see we know no one here. Now if only I could hope that you would take pity on a stranger, and do the honours of the place to him, I should say a month for certain. But we can’t eat ourselves. We should come to blows in a week; and fraternal strife is shocking, isn’t it?’

He drawled very slowly, with hardly any variation of tone in his speech. But his great blue eyes played upon the girl and had their effect.

‘It’s a little irregular, isn’t it?’ she said. ‘Don’t you know any one at all here who could introduce us properly?’

‘Oh, I say, you know,’ drawled Ralph; ‘don’t say poor Crad did it improperly; he isn’t capable of it, I ’sure you.’

Fanny laughed, and sent the sparkle of her eyes right into the blue of Ralph’s gaze.

‘Look here,’ said Ralph, ‘can’t you say you’ve met us somewhere? Are you Trawlhaven people so beastly particular as all that?’

Fanny looked as if she were about to relent. ‘Come on the pier to-morrow night,’ said she, ‘and I’ll see what I can do.’

‘And now——?’ said Ralph, inquiringly.

‘And now—good night, Mr. D’Esterre,’ said Fanny, holding back her hand which Ralph sought.

‘Good Lord, man, here’s Uncle Bob,’ whispered Cradock.

Ralph bowed gracefully and turned.

Robert Bear was thrusting his way fiercely through the crowd. Two girls, annoyed by his brusque disregard of the courtesies of the pier by night, showered a full packet of confetti, dirty and otherwise, over his face and eyes. It did not tend to improve his temper. And he had seen his nephews in conversation with a woman of a type which he believed he recognised. He was always an obtrusively moral man in sexual matters—or at any rate he had that reputation. It would never do for these boys to be seen speaking publicly with a woman of that class. Perhaps a private acquaintance might not have annoyed him so greatly. That I cannot say. The character and conduct of this man Robert Bear have always been a puzzle to me since his second marriage, and since the facts concerning the end of his first wife’s life came to me after her death. I can only tell the story as I know it, and my readers must judge the man themselves, must say for themselves if he was a hypocrite or no, if he was a man who burst convention gallantly, or deserted a noble woman vilely for a shameful wanton or no. I have never been able to

read the riddle of his life to my own satisfaction. I may have my own opinion, but it would be unfair to give that. Let his actions and his words, so far as I can give them, speak for him. In the one case, no man is to be pitied more than he; in the other, no hell-begotten devil should be more abhorred by every decent human being.

As soon as he met his nephews he scowled angrily on them.

'I thought I'd come out for another breath of sea-air,' he said; 'and this is what I find.'

'Nothing disgraceful, I hope, uncle,' said Ralph, while Cradock shook in his shoes. 'I did not think you'd object to our making an acquaintance or two here.'

Bear snorted. He held his peace till he reached the hotel, and it was not for either of the young men to try to wrench it from him. Then he said: 'I wish that you would avoid being seen associating with a woman of that class.'

I wonder if he ever thinks of those words now! O Robert Bear! Robert Bear! should I and all men pray for your release from the misery of life, or should we call down shame and ignominy upon you? Well, in any case, *you* know, and knowledge must be either a boon or such a curse as few men have endured.

CHAPTER II

MRS. BEAR, HER SONS, AND HER HOME

ON the following morning Ralph and Cradock D'Esterre were careful to come down to an early breakfast in order to see their uncle off to town. For the last ten years Bear had made his headquarters at a large freestone modern house which stood in extensive grounds, with park, paddocks, and sufficient grazing-ground for a couple of herds of Kerry cows and their attendant bulls, and which claimed no more ostentatious title than *The Oaks*. The estate was not far from Chelmsford, and the train service suited the millionaire well enough. Here he and his wife Lavinia lived with their three surviving sons, Cyrus, George, and Edward, in such simplicity and comfort that it was difficult for an occasional visitor to grasp the fact that it was the establishment of one of the wealthiest men in England. It always speaks well for a man who has worked up from competence to great riches when there is no reek of gold about his home. But the whole of the credit was not due to Robert. His wife Lavinia was one of those natural, kindly women, who cannot exist in the fetid atmo-

sphere of modern plutocracy. She had married her husband when he was in comfortable circumstances and no more. She had been extremely happy during the first years of her marriage, and now that Robert could sign a cheque for more money than she thought any single man ought to have, she saw no reason for altering her manner of life. She had refused over and over again to preside over the magnificent London house which Robert offered to provide for her. She was content, more than content, to look after her dairy and her children at The Oaks. Her eldest son Cyrus was now twenty-five years of age, and had recently been taken into partnership by his father. George, the second son, was twenty-three, and Edward, the fourth (the third had died in infancy), was a delicate boy of eighteen. Cyrus had not yet actually taken up the duties which his partnership laid upon him, and before he did so it had been determined that it would be well for him and for the firm if he spent six months or so in investigating the conditions and principles of trade which have brought Chicago into such prominence in the business world.

Cyrus and George had both been educated at Winchester, but their father did not believe in sending a young man destined to a commercial career to either of the Universities. Cyrus was a tall, well-built man of over six feet. He had played Rugby for the South more than once, and was more stalwart than his some-

what stooping shoulders implied. He was dark, with singularly beautiful dark eyes, a clean olive skin, a resonant mellow voice, with the delicacy of feature of a girl, the kindness of heart and daintiness of tact of his mother, and the thews and sinews of a son of Anak. He wore a slight black moustache, but his face was otherwise clean-shaven. George was like him in body. But his features were coarser, his hair and skin fairer. There was more of his father in George than in Cyrus, and he lacked that nicety of feeling, that exquisite avoidance of hurting the feelings of those with whom he came in contact which made Cyrus one of the most fascinating men of his time. George was to enter the firm in a year or two. At present he was studying the mysteries of spices and of the export trade in table delicacies as a privileged clerk. Poor Edward suffered from his weak constitution. He had never been to a public school, and he bore the taint of private tuition all over him. He was good-looking enough, in a rather effeminate way, and he was almost as tall as his brothers. But there was a weediness about his limbs and body, and a pallor about his face, which did not promise a long life. Morally Cyrus was the cleanest and most robust. He was no precisian, but his tastes were healthy and manly. George was perhaps hardly so vigorous in his dislike to that species of life which decent men call nastiness, and there were seeds in Edward which might cause both

him and his parents infinite trouble as years went on. With such a mother it would have been impossible for any one of the boys to be really vicious so long as he was under home influence. And, as yet, all three were devoted to their mother, and content enough to make The Oaks their principal place of residence.

Lavinia was one of those rare women who do so much to make it still possible for men to reverence their sex. She had married for love, entirely careless whether Robert had hundreds or thousands a year. As with most good women her interests were restricted to her home and her people. But her infinite kindness and charity spread about her to the benefit of all with whom she came in touch. She was a tall, thin woman, four years younger than her husband. She dressed and carried herself with the utmost simplicity. She rarely wore colours, and the black, plainly made frocks which were her favourites would have been suitable enough for any humble seamstress. Her face was lean, her cheek bones prominent. Her mouth was neither large nor small, but well shaped, with lips inclined to fulness, if aught so delicate as their pout could be called full. Her lines of feature were pure and lovely. Her nose thin at the top, but swelling gradually to quivering nostrils. Her forehead (never shadowed nor obscured by any trick of hair-dressing) was high and broad. She brought her black soft hair plainly back to a simple knot above her neck. Her skin was

dark, with a flush beneath its olive. Her eyes (the eyes which Cyrus had inherited) were huge, black, sombre. And yet no eyes in the world could beam love, tenderness, charity, mercy, hope, and trust more certainly than hers. She had not desired the wealth which had come to her husband. But she was grateful for it, in that she was enabled thereby to help her nephews, and to extend the charitable yearnings of her heart the more abundantly. But for the advantage in alms-giving which the wealth brought her, I think she would have preferred the conditions of her earlier years of marriage. For though as yet Robert had been a good husband to her, the old community of interests, the old mutual anxiety, the old enjoyment in some unusual 'treat' had gone with the necessity to consider ways and means. Marital passion must be transitory from the very nature of it. She knew that; but she thought that Robert had of late lost the tenderness which often means so much more to husband and wife than mere passion. It was not that he neglected her. But there seemed some lack of sympathy, some lessening of reciprocal understanding, which had come between them since his business affairs had assumed such vast proportions. Still, she thought she was a happy woman. The delicacy of Edward troubled her a little at times. But she prayed that he might outgrow it. She herself was far from physically strong. There was a phthisical history in her family, and though she had never experienced any

of the symptoms of tuberculosis, she had been warned by a great Harley Street consultant that if once the bacilli invaded her system, they would find little opposition to their career of devastation.

She fancied that the hereditary taint lay hid in Ralph D'Esterre. That dreaminess of his alarmed her at times, and those great fainting eyes of his were more beautiful than healthy. With the anxious tenderness of her nature she had asked her husband to give himself two or three days' holiday at Trawlhaven to see if the boys were comfortable. Living, as she did, in seclusion at The Oaks (for she disliked society in all its vogues, and made her dislike so obvious that her circle of acquaintance had become very small), she had little idea of the way in which young men lived at the end of the nineteenth century. Close as she lived to London, she rarely went up, and she knew nothing of the London of the Smart Set, of the monster hotels, of modern theatres or music halls. She lived the life of the sixties and was content therewith.

'Well, dear,' she said, as she welcomed her husband home on the Tuesday evening. 'How did you find them? Did they seem comfortable and well?'

Bear had gone up by the earliest fast train, and spent the day at his office. Cyrus was to sail for the States that week, and he had been busy writing and cabling to certain great commercial men in his son's behalf. Cyrus and George were staying in town that night. Edward was away at Bournemouth.

'They're comfortable enough,' growled Bear, who could never show decent civility save in exceptional circumstances. 'You needn't worry about them.'

'But, Bub,' said Lavinia, 'did the hotel seem clean and comfortable?'

She had a deep, sweet contralto voice, and a slight peculiarity of pronunciation, which made her say 'Bub' for 'Bob' and 'Tum' for 'Tom.' But the music of her voice was such that it was a pleasure to listen to it regardless of the words she said. She had that charm of tone which has done so much for Sarah Bernhardt. Every syllable she spoke was a song.

'It's the biggest hotel in the place, you know, Lavinia,' said Bear. 'Why, it's like the Carlton in its way. Where did you think they were? At a village inn?'

'Oh no,' said Lavinia. 'But it is so long since I've been to Trawlhaven; I didn't know that there was any hotel there but the Royal, and they did not write from there. I'm sorry if I worried you, dear, by asking.'

'Well, I don't quite like the class of people there is there,' said Bear. 'But, after all, they're old enough to look after themselves, and seaside acquaintances don't count much with young fellows of their age. By the bye, Cyrus and George will not be down to-night. There's some dinner or other on they want to go to.'

'I know, Bub,' said Lavinia. 'They told me this morning before they went away. I *shall* miss Cyrus when he goes away. Won't you?'

Bear broke out into a coarse, harsh laugh. 'My dear Lavinia,' said he, 'you can't keep men always at your apron-strings. It might be better for your nephews if you could.'

Lavinia was quick enough to see that there was something which had annoyed her husband in connection with the D'Esterres. She looked a little wistfully in his face. 'What is it?' she asked pleadingly. 'Nothing seriously wrong? Is it?'

'Oh no,' said Bear. 'But—well I'll tell you. I saw them talking to a woman on the pier when they thought I had gone in for the night, and I did not like the look of her. That's all. I dare say I mistook her character. But there's a very mixed lot down there now. Hang it! I saw one of the girls who used to be in the jelly-room down there as smart as paint, and I'll swear there were two of the girls from Bunch and Martin's bottling-room. I remember noticing 'em when Bunch showed me over the place. But this woman wasn't that class. She looked as if she might be dangerous. An intriguing woman, of some force of character, I should say. However, they'll only be down there a month, and I've given them a hint that I didn't like the look of her. Anyway, they can't come to much harm. They're neither of 'em fools enough to get engaged to a girl without asking my consent first, and even if they did, and I made 'em break it off (as I certainly should), and she sued one

of 'em, she couldn't get much, for they haven't got a penny between 'em. 'Pon my word, Lavinia, I often think it's lucky for some of your people that you married me, and that camphor slumped that time when I had sold so heavily. I don't know where they'd be without the help they get from here.'

It is not a very delicate thing to do to remind your wife that you are practically keeping her family. But there was no arrogance about poor Lavinia. She knew that her husband was indeed a godsend to her family—or rather to her sister's family—and she blessed him for it with the purest and simplest gratitude possible. But for her habit of self-obliteration, of self-sacrifice on the altar of marital affection and trust, her life would have been unendurable. But as she never understood how tactless and unfeeling her husband sometimes was, she did not suffer, where some women would have writhed in indignant humiliation.

'Well,' said Bear, 'we'd better go up to dress.'

'Oh!' said Lavinia. 'Very well, I *am* ready.'

It was one of Bear's complaints that his wife never seemed to see that it was her duty to make some sort of a show before the servants. Lavinia was wearing her usual plain black-stuff frock. She never decked herself out with jewels, and the dress she wore about the house or in the dairy in the morning could only have been distinguished from her favourite dinner-dress by an expert. Even the opportunity of precious

stones and fine raiment did not make her husband's wealth any the more welcome to her. Apart, as has been said, from the charities she was enabled to bestow, those millions were as dross to her.

'Really, I think you might smarten yourself up a little more now,' said Bear sullenly. 'Why, the people at the *table d'hôte* at the Dominion at Trawlhaven were far better dressed than you are. You ought to have some idea of the responsibility of your position now, you know. It doesn't look well before the servants to come down to dinner in an old rag like that.'

Lavinia's lips trembled a little. 'Very well, dear,' said she. 'I thought this would do. But I'll put on another dress if you like.'

'It oughtn't to be necessary for me to have to tell you,' said Bear.

He did not like to bully his wife before his sons, I'll say that much for him. And now that he had her to himself he made the most of it. But things like that did not hurt Lavinia. It needed a stroke straight on her heart to pain her. Possibly she had become inured to her husband's boorishness, and only saw the man whom she had loved and still loved through it.

She touched the bosom of her simple gown with uncertain fingers, and then, with a patient look round the hall, she followed her husband up the wide staircase to the gallery running round above, into which the principal bedrooms opened.

CHAPTER III

FANNY KEEPS HER APPOINTMENT

VERY soon after the simple dinner which was customary at The Oaks was finished Lavinia went to bed, and left Robert Bear to look into the final arrangements for Cyrus's trip to the States. The man had dismissed all thoughts of his nephews from his mind. But Lavinia dwelt on what she had heard and her soul was troubled within her. At the very minute when she began to disrobe prior to retiring for the night, Ralph and Cradock D'Esterre were strolling jauntily down the south pier at Trawlhaven on their way to keep the appointment which Fanny Butler had made with them on the previous evening.

'I wonder if she'll bring a friend with her to-night,' said Cradock. 'I suppose as she's your find I shall have to stand out if she doesn't.'

'Well, two to one in these matters ain't much sport,' said Ralph, removing the cigarette from his lips and grinning. 'Any way, there's plenty of other decent-looking gals about to-night. They're a better lot on the whole than they were last night.'

The band against the pier pavilion was rioting through one of those wondrous medleys of sound called a *pot pourri*, in which the 'British Grenadiers' gave way to 'Annie Laurie,' which in its turn was displaced by 'Hearts of Oak.' The pier was less crowded, but the seats near the bandstand were full, and the rank smell of cigarette-paper hung thick between the walls of the pavilion and the bandstand; for the night was close and windless, and the fags were many. The pier was fairly well lighted, but not unpleasantly well. There were plenty of dark corners where young love might revel in the obscurity, and these all held contrasts of light feminine stuff and male flannel. The smell from the fishmarket was a little more pronounced than it had been on the previous night, for Tuesday is a better day for the buyers and sellers than Monday.

'Where the devil is she?' asked Ralph, when he and his brother had nearly reached the end of the pier, from which the red light on the top of the tower-covered rotunda warned the incoming craft of the fairway.

'Bet you she's on the same spot,' said Cradock, with a chuckle. 'Just the sort of sentimental thing a gal would do, to wait for us on the same place, y'know.'

Brainless as he was, his masculine instinct occasionally went straight to the fact, and when the young fellows reached the point of the pier by the steps

down to the harbour (whence the sixpenny mariners ventured out into the deep), the slim, graceful figure of the girl who had attracted Ralph appeared. 'Ah! There she is,' said Ralph. 'Well, good-bye, old chap; I'll pick you up on the pier before it closes, unless I can persuade her to go for a stroll. If we *do* go off, I'll look out for you at the second shelter on the front at eleven.'

'Right oh,' said Cradock, raising his hat to the girl and turning on his heel. He went in quest of some fair companion with whom he might beguile the hours of his separation from his brother, and Ralph strode forward to the girl with extended hand. This time she did not withdraw her fingers. She laughed as she looked in the young man's eyes. 'It's dreadfully improper,' she said. 'Isn't it?'

'Oh,' said Ralph, yielding to her expressed coyness, 'no one is ever rigid in *les convenances* when at the seaside.'

'That may be so,' said the girl. 'But then you see I'm *not* at the seaside.'

'Why, where are you then?' asked Ralph, laughing. 'Am I the victim of a lovely delusion?'

'Don't be silly,' said Fanny, tapping his arm with her hand. 'I mean that I live here. My sister is Mrs. Ford, the bloater-paste and tinned-food Ford, you know.'

It would be difficult for any one to go down to the

neighbourhood of Trawlhaven or Easterby without knowing the name of Ford, the bloater-paste, the herring and tomatoes, the herring and shrimp sauce, the soft roes, the great canning people. Their bully-beef and vegetables have given sustenance to poor Tommy many and many a time. Robert Bear bought thousands of dozens of their herring preparations for export. Fanny meant to show her respectability at once. She had no idea of useless dalliance. All her flirting was with a view to some material benefit. She had a husband and an establishment in her eye, and though she might consent to use herself as bait for those desirable fish, she meant to take very good care that the fish did not suck the bait off and escape scot-free. Although she was a year younger than Ralph, she could have given him a decade in craft and experience. For some reason or other she had failed to secure a decent offer, and the use of her sister's name was useless so far as the natives of Trawlhaven were concerned. To strangers she could speak of herself as the daughter of the famous artist Thomas Butler, as the sister-in-law of the great canning man Florance Ford. But Trawlhaven knew that the Butlers' sole means of support lay in the boarding-house on the Marine Parade.

Her father, old Tom Butler, had done some good work in his younger days. One or two of his landscapes and waterscapes had created some stir, and in

the Academy of 1880 'A Mowing Marsh' had been well hung and fairly well sold. On the strength of this success he had wooed and won the daughter of a well-known Trawlhaven boat-builder, who was supposed to be one of the wealthiest men in the town. The old boat-builder had refused to make a settlement on his daughter, but promised that she should benefit to the extent of £10,000 under his will. A few years later he went into bankruptcy. Steam and iron had ruined the local ship-building trade, and the demand for herring-boats had not then boomed. This was hard on Tom. He had relied greatly on his father-in-law. He was neither a genius nor a persistent worker. He had had his success, and for the rest of his life he never failed to brag of it. He painted some hundreds of pictures, but he never got another hung in Burlington House, nor sold one which brought in more than it had cost him for canvas, stretcher, paint, and drinks. It was then that he found that he might, after all, have done worse than marry his Sophia. Things had got to a very low ebb with the family. There were no sons, fortunately for him. For if there had been, the board school would have been all that he could have afforded for their education. As for the two girls, Nellie and Fanny, one eleven and the other ten, why, they picked up their 'learning' at home, and learned more useful things than are taught in most schools. Sophia saw that something must be done to save the

family from sheer starvation. So she plucked up her courage and started a boarding-house on the Marine Parade. For the first year she had most of her furniture on credit. But furnishing people at seaside resorts are not unused to the process which miners call 'grub-staking.' They kept an eye on her house and charged her monstrous prices for the goods she bought of them. But they did not press her for the money till after the summer season had filled her pockets. Luck favoured her. From the first she rarely had an empty seat at her table from the middle of July to the middle of September. Perhaps Providence smiled on her endeavours. Perhaps the little girls helped to attract boarders. Certainly she was extraordinarily fortunate. The children were winning little things, impudent, but not offensively impertinent, and when they were young there was a good deal of pathos in their dark, winsome eyes.

Subsequent years strengthened the position of the house. True, every season was not so fat as the first. But other boarding-house keepers grumbled that Mrs. Butler certainly had more than her fair share of luck, and by the time that Nellie was nineteen and Fanny eighteen, 'The Pontine Boarding Establishment, Mrs. Butler and Daughters,' was quite one of the best-known resorts of those quaint folk who like to feed and live in droves.

Then Nellie met Florance Ford at a function which

was called 'A Parochial Dance'! Nellie was taller than her sister, but far less interesting. She was practically brainless, and her conversation was on the level of that of any ordinary idiot asylum. She was less distinguished in her flat, uninteresting features than was Fanny (with her brightness and fire). She was always falling in love in some silly way with some touring mummer, or with an officer in the fishery protection gunboat to whom she had never spoken,—or with anything in trousers. Her one idea of humour was to speak of her foolish infatuations. Her notions of gay enjoyment were tea and a bun at a confectioner's with some male fool. 'I had such a ripping time,' she would say, after a meringue and a glass of grocer's sherry, paid for by some juvenile boarder who had nothing else to do, and who was willing to give her her 'ripping time' for the sake of beguiling his tedium. Whether Nellie intended to get herself compromised with Florance Ford, the son of old William the canning expert, is unknown to this deponent. She may have had more sense than she seemed to have. Anyhow, the young fellow was fool enough and she was sharp enough to make and keep an appointment after the parochial dance. Then one night they were found under circumstances which were as compromising as could be. As a matter of fact their relations were entirely innocent. But the scandal would have been great. Mrs. Butler wept. Old Tom

cursed and threatened. Nellie pleaded. Old William Ford was a strict Wesleyan, a power in his chapel, a municipal giant. 'You silly young ass,' he said to his son. 'You've done for yourself. You must marry the girl. I can't have any scandal.'

So Nellie found a husband, and Fanny a strategical base from which to conduct her matrimonial campaigns at greater advantage than she could do from the boarding-house on the Marine Parade. Florance Ford, the younger member of the firm, made the best of it. He became the proud father of two sons lawfully. But his infidelities were flagrant and notorious throughout the whole town, known to every one save his wife, and, possibly, his father. The success of the boarding-house irritated him. He thought that it reflected upon him, the only son of the principal inhabitant of Trawlhaven, that his wife's mother and sister should run the Pontine establishment. He expostulated with his wife and her mother, and even offered to make the latter a small allowance if she would consent to drop her undertaking. The old lady grew furious, and Nellie backed her up. 'My dear man,' said Nellie, 'you can't complain of a boarding-house! Why, even up here in the north part of the town half the houses take paying-guests. It isn't as if mother let lodgings. Of course that would never do. Every one knows that it is quite respectable to take boarders, and that it need not lower one's prestige in

the least. What harm can there be in having visitors (I prefer that name) to stay with you? Every one has visitors. It isn't—as I said before—it isn't as if mother took in lodgers.'

'Well,' said Florance, 'I'll be hanged if I can see it. Surely the better class of people either take lodgings or stay at the hotels. I know jolly well I'd never sit down to table with a lot of beastly people I'd never seen before, and never wished to see again. The whole publicity of the common herding of a boarding-house seems to me to be simply indecent. But lodgings are different. You *can* have a room to yourself and live by yourself in them.'

'Well, you're all wrong then,' said Nellie petulantly. 'Every one in Trawlhaven knows that to take boarders is merely a sign that one is not so well off as one used to be. It is a sort of guarantee of past superiority. But lodging-house keepers are on a different plane altogether. They *are* inferior, if you like.'

'It's too much for me!' said Florance. 'However, I see you won't do as I wish, and I must grin and bear it. But mind this, I don't mind giving Fanny a helping hand to get her off respectably. But I won't have your mother coming here. You must settle that.'

Nellie was pleased at the promise on Fanny's behalf. And the old woman fell into the understanding readily enough.

'I'm sure I don't want to be seen in your

cannery,' she said, with some spirit. 'I can make a living for my own without asking you. As for publicity, I don't see that you can take much harm with your name on every hoarding in Trawlhaven and the stink of your oil refinery and herring cannery poisoning the good sea-breeze. Pah! My business is more savoury than yours, at any rate.'

Florance knew that it was useless to strive with a woman's tongue. He grunted and went out to the Sceptre, where there was a new and pretty barmaid who met with his approval.

Nellie's marriage did not improve the prosperity of the boarding-house. Her amiable stupidity, her readiness to flirt languidly with any of the younger boarders who were prepared to afford her one of her 'ripping times' had all been assets. Fanny was too clever to be agreeable to most of the young idiots who paid their two guineas a week for board, lodging, and flirtation with the hostess's daughters thrown in. She was impatient of all foolishness that did not tend to her own advantage, and she knew that no one who ever stayed at a boarding-house was likely to be a match for her. She wanted something better than the bank clerks or budding bagmen, the stockbrokers' clerks, or the pawnbrokers' assistants who formed the class which filled the Trawlhaven boarding-houses. She was not sufficiently regardless of her filial duties to refuse to help her mother about the house. But she

gradually abstained from taking her meals with the boarders. Little by little she weaned herself from the intimacy with the paying-guests which cribbed, cabined, and confined her too much. There was better game to be found on the piers, and she did not wish to be pointed out to any acquaintance of whom she might approve as 'the girl from the Pontine, don't you know.' She had her brother-in-law's permission to refer to him as a sort of guarantee of respectability, or even of provincial grandeur. She had used him before on occasions which led to nothing . . . for there were wicked yachting men who had put into Trawlhaven harbour, spent a pleasant hour or two in flirtation with Fanny, and left without being at all impressed by the name of Ford. Indeed some of them laughed when she mentioned Florance. 'What! old Ford's kippers? Eh—what?' they said. 'Dammy! I once had to eat some of his emergency rations in South Africa. The old rascal ought to be shot. Eh—what?'

But with Ralph D'Esterre it was different. He knew the name of Ford well, and revered it as a golden one. His and Cradock's own comfort came from their uncle, a man whose trade was certainly no higher in the social scale than that of Ford and Son. Moreover, he laughed to think how small his uncle would feel when he told him that the girl to whom he had taken objection was the sister-in-law of a provincial magnate who could fairly claim an equality of position, if not of wealth, with the Mincing Lane millionaire.

It was with some effusion that he caught the ball which Fanny tossed to him.

'Why, certainly I know,' said he. 'And I'm the nephew of Robert Bear. Bear's spices and Ford's sprats! Eh? I've seen tons and tons of your brother-in-law's stuff at my uncle's warehouse. Now, don't you think we are sufficiently introduced *now*?' He held out his hand again, and again she permitted him to clasp her fingers. The hands lingered together for a space. The girl was alluring, very. Not daintily pretty. Not at all. Not even pretty if one picked her face to pieces. But there was an electricity, a magnetism about her, a fascination in the very thrill of blood in her fingers, that set Ralph's pulse beating faster than it had beat for years, faster than it had beat since he experienced his first manly passion and doubted whether it was returned. Though his beauty and woman's foolishness had made him *blasé*, there was something new about this girl which held him in thrall. He began to feel the eagerness of the chase. There was no subservient worship from her. She held her own well.

She was essentially practical. The mutual interests of Bear and Ford might serve as an excuse for her to permit a certain intimacy to Ralph. But how could she explain her acquaintance to others? How could she make it possible for him to claim her as a friend without disclosing the fact that he had practically 'picked her up' on the pier?

She stamped her little foot on the planks. 'That's all very well,' said she. 'But you forget what country towns are. If I am seen talking to you half Trawlhaven will wonder who you are.'

This was not strictly true. The whole of Trawlhaven would have thought it only too likely that Fanny should have formed any desirable acquaintance without the slightest regard to the proprieties. She knew this well enough, but she also knew that the man himself might ask questions of himself, and wonder how it was that he had been allowed to get on terms with a decent girl without the interposition of any mutual friend. The name of Ford would do much. Would it do enough?

Every word of hers brought Ralph more under her charm. His apathetic tonelessness was the natural prey of her vivid energy. He *must* get to know more of her.

'Oh, hang Trawlhaven!' he said. 'Surely you are not going to trouble yourself about a lot of fat-headed provincial bounders such as these natives?'

'Thanks, so much,' she replied. 'I'm a native of Trawlhaven myself. My father, the artist, lives here. My sister and all my people are provincial fat-headed bounders!'

'Oh, you know I didn't mean that,' expostulated Ralph. 'But you know that you ain't a bit provincial, and I don't suppose any of your people are. But couldn't I make your father's acquaintance? That would smooth matters over, surely.'

She hesitated. She could not give the boarding-house away yet. 'He's away just now,' she said. 'But I'm sure any relation of Mr. Bear's might call on my brother-in-law and ask to see over his works without the necessity for any letter of introduction.'

'But I'll get the letter,' cried Ralph. 'I'll write to my uncle to-night for it.'

He laughed to himself as he saw a better way than ever for confounding the prejudices of his uncle. He would not mention Fanny as yet. He would express an interest in the great factory of the Fords—an interest which would delight his uncle—and then, when he had become a friend of the Fords, he would let his uncle know that the woman of whom he had spoken so harshly was related to the firm which brought much grist to Mincing Lane.

Fanny flashed a glance at him and saw that he meant what he said. Every woman knows when a man is attracted by her. She was delighted. She thought she saw before her the best chance which had ever come to her. The man seemed a bit of 'a soft.' But what did that matter if his position were satisfactory? She knew that she was not meant for this restricted provincial existence. She looked to London as her real life's arena. Even if she decided not to marry this handsome nincompoop, he might serve as a stepping-stone to the goal she longed to reach. She looked up at him, and there was surrender in her eyes.

'Come,' said Ralph, 'shall we go for a stroll?'

'If you like,' said Fanny.

She led him from the pier to the dim light of the beach. There were many couples walking slowly along, arm in arm, by the faint hiss of the tiny breakers. But, despite the shimmer of the moon through a veil of cloud, features were hard to distinguish, and all the other couples were too absorbed in their own amorous rhapsodies to take notice of the identities of other wanderers by the sea.

Fanny was no mere wanton. She had no purpose in leading Ralph from light to darkness, other than the furthering of her schemes for self-elevation. She did not wish to be recognised with him as yet. She could not tell what men he might know, and many of the promenaders on the pier would have been pleased to tell him that he had got hold of one of the boarding-house girls from the Pontine. When he had got to know her formally, and she had him more in hand, the disclosure would not be so dangerous.

And Ralph understood that his attentions must be kept within bounds. It was not merely the influence of the name of Ford, but that subtle sexual instinct which warns and encourages in silence, which made him flirt with this casual acquaintance with as much restraint as if he were in his aunt's drawing-room.

Truly Fanny was a clever girl, a girl of character.

CHAPTER IV

RALPH MEETS THE FORDS

'WELL, how did *you* get on?' asked Cradock of his brother when the two met at the appointed rendezvous at eleven o'clock that night. 'I had a rare old time. Did you notice that little fair girl, with the white fluffy dress and a pink ribbon round her Panama? She was alone too, and I made up to her. She's a Whiteley's gal, and a fair scorcher. My dear boy, I haven't found anything tastier for a long time. How did you get on?'

Ralph looked at his brother with that quiet insolence of amusement which was his most powerful weapon. 'My dear Crad,' he said, 'you forget. Miss Butler is not a common tart. I'm glad you enjoyed yourself, but we were hardly playing the same game, don't you know. Miss Butler is related to the Fords, the big herring-tinning people whom uncle deals with a lot. You must have heard of them. It was awfully good of her to let me speak to her without an introduction. You mustn't think she's like your Whiteley girl. I'm going to get to know her people. So for God's sake be careful what you say.'

Cradock looked at his brother. 'That's all right,' said he. 'I suppose she produced vouchers.'

'Oh, don't be an ass, Crad,' said Ralph angrily. 'I'm going to write to uncle to-night for a letter of introduction to the Fords. You know he buys their stuff by the thousand of tins, and he'll be delighted to think that either of us has worked up any interest in anything connected with his trade. She's a lady, my dear fellow. You can't help seeing that.'

Cradock said nothing. He may have formed an opinion which he was fated to alter in afterdays. But he was afraid of his brother's studied insolence. He turned the subject to his own experiences, and these amused both brothers till they entered the hotel and prepared to go to bed.

The next evening Ralph met Fanny again, and again the two walked on the beach. Fanny learned that the letter had been written, and when she went home her heart was almost tender to the sleepy youth who offered her the chance of delivery from her provincial surroundings. But she had kept him aloof. Men say many things to girls to gain their ends. When Fanny knew that the letter had really been written and saw that Ralph had used it to become known to the Fords, then she might perhaps let him go a little further. Not too far. Perhaps she would allow him a kiss. And what was a kiss to a boarding-house girl?

‘Really, Lavinia,’ said Robert Bear, as he read Ralph’s letter at the breakfast-table at The Oaks, ‘Ralph has more sense than I thought. He has learned that the chief factory of Ford and Son is at Trawlhaven, and wants a letter of introduction to the Fords so that he may look over it. I expect he’s a bit bored down there. But it speaks well for the boy that he should care to see a thing of that kind. He says that he knows that we do a large trade with them, and I didn’t even know that he knew the name of the firm. Come, come. If he goes on like this I may be able to find him work to do in Mincing Lane which will pay him better than all his architect’s business.’

‘I hope he isn’t too dull, poor boy,’ said Lavinia. ‘Do you think he’d like me or Edward to run down for a day or two?’

‘Really,’ said Bear, ‘you are too absurd. Can’t you understand that young fellows wish to be alone? He has Cradock with him. I shall be pleased to let him have the letter, though. It is very sensible of him, very. I dare say I may run down myself later on and have a look over Ford’s place. I did not know their principal factory was at Trawlhaven. I always thought it was up at Arbroath. But I suppose that’s merely a branch. Certainly I must run down. Now I think of it, I might have known that Trawlhaven would be the headquarters, as they make such a speciality of herring preparations. But I always thought

more of their meat and vegetable line, and I'm sure that up at Arbroath——'

So Ralph got his letter, and showed it to Fanny on the evening of its receipt. Cradock was happy enough with the Whiteley girl, and, though he did not know it, was indulging in a pastime which was far less dangerous than that of his brother. He had of course met Fanny more than once, but, as was natural, he only met her to say 'Good night.' But Ralph by now was becoming seriously enamoured of this curious woman with her short hair and her keen intelligence. He meant to waste no time in checking her statements, for, impossible as it seemed that she should have lied, it was strange that a girl with such connections should have permitted him to 'know' her (even in the seaside resort sense of knowing) with such an entire lack of ceremony.

The great Ford works were on a sort of table-land, on the summit of the rise to the north of the town. Here the three vast chimneys belched out the smoke from the furnaces of the ovens or oil boilers. Here were the American machines which turned out finished cans from a flat sheet of tin, or transformed a board to a packing-case without a hand's interference. During the autumn herring-season the whole place reeked of rancid oil and fish salt. But as yet the great herring canning had not commenced. There were a few coming down from the north, but very few, and the

chief industry now being carried on was the manufacture of bloater-paste from last year's ham-cured herring and of sundry meat preparations which varied from spiced beef, chicken and tongue (all Daneshire bred, fed, killed, and cooked) to old boar and sow pigs converted into rancid brawn at a low price.

William Ford was with his son Florance in the private office of the works when Ralph's card was taken in. William was a bluff, hearty man of five-and-fifty, with square shoulders, made the squarer by the local tailor. He was a bit of a dandy in his way, and his clothes always looked a little too new. His hearty, broad face, rather militant in expression, was held at an angle of at least twenty with the vertical. He swaggered as he strode sturdily, with quick, firm steps. He wore a truculent moustache, and an inch of close-clipped sandy whisker on each side of his face. His face gave an impression of squareness which was, of course, not justified by its proper measurements. It was the rough hardness of the man's personality that imparted that square look to his face. He was not obese, but he had a comfortable protuberance about the lower buttons of his waistcoat. He had made his business himself; indeed, he was even more of a self-made man than Robert Bear, for the latter had had a father well known in the trade, whereas Ford was the first of his line. He was a professed Methodist, and did not look it. He would have made a capital soldier of fortune

if looks were the only thing. As it was, he had forced himself to the foremost place in the local public affairs, and (shrewd man of business though he was) actually took pride in being on the commission of the peace for the town, a councillor, and a deputy mayor. He was worth some hundred thousand or so, and that gave him more solid importance in Trawlhaven than his millions gave Bear in London. Probably Ford thought more of himself than Bear did. But he was flattered all the same when he read the letter of introduction which Ralph sent in to him.

‘See here, Florance,’ he said to his son. ‘I suppose we can show this Mr. D’Esterre over the place. I suppose the Bears are not going to start in the same line and wish to spy out our secrets.’

Florance read the letter through. He was a small man, slimmer and shorter than his father, more sharp in outline, of slimmer build. His face was narrow and rather Hebraic in character. His nose was prominent, his lips thin and tight pressed, his chestnut moustache waxed and curled to fine points. His eyes were keen and rather shifty. They glittered brilliantly at times. But it was rarely that they lit up at pure humour. His way of speech was quicker, sharper than his father’s. He gave an impression of always being on the look-out for a smart stroke, whereas his father owed much to the honest bluntness of his manner. On the whole, young Florance thought himself far the smarter

man of business of the two, whereas his father knew that the boy was promising but was as yet but a tyro in a deal.

Ralph was shown in to the private office and greeted with the utmost heartiness.

'My dear sir,' said William Ford, holding out his brawny fingers and clutching the younger man's hand. 'Delighted to meet any connection of my excellent customer Robert Bear. And, may I ask, are you in that famous firm too? Florance, we are delighted, are we not?'

On any ordinary occasion Ralph would have met gush of the kind from a man of the kind with a dull, unseeing stare, and if the two young men had been alone together, there would have been less heartiness in the salutations. But Ralph had Fanny Butler in his head, and Florance was curious to know what any one connected with Bear and Co. was doing at Trawlhaven, wanting to look over the Hierus works (as the Ford main factories were called).

'No, no,' said Ralph, with a smile. 'I have nothing to do with the business. But I happened to be down here for a month or so, and I've heard so much of your factory down here, and knew the name so well from hearing my uncle speak of you, that I thought I should like to see some of the wonderful canning work that is done. No, no. You needn't fear

showing me trade secrets. Ha! ha! I'm an architect. I know nothing of this.'

Naturally this made Florance more suspicious than ever. 'It's merely a matter of form, you know,' said he. 'But I suppose you'll give me your word that, so far as you know, Bears have no idea of going into the sort of thing. Eh?'

'Good Lord! yes,' said Ralph, with wide eyes, a little contemptuous. 'I assure you I know nothing about it. Mind, I don't say what the dooce they may be going to do or not. I know nothing of pepper, camphor, or export grub. So far as I know there's nothing new on, anyway I'll assure you that five minutes after I've seen whatever you are good enough to show me, I shall have forgotten it. Eh?'

He laughed a little scornfully. Then his eyes lit up, and he looked at Florance with an expression which few men or women could have withstood. 'My dear fellow,' said he, 'to tell you the truth, I really don't care a hang whether you show me how you paste bloaters or tomato herrings or not. But I and my brother were beastly dull down here, and I thought you might not mind my looking you up. You see I've often heard of your firm.'

Florance was entirely disarmed. As for William, he had been irritated by his son's fatuous show of distrust. The older man flattered himself he could tell in a minute if a man were trying to do an underhand

action or not. He could not, of course. But he was right enough in this instance. 'Come, Florance,' said he. 'Show Mr. D'Esterre round. I've got this scheme to consider.'

So Ralph saw the pickling plots, the oil tanks, the refinery, the tinning factory, the cleaning and tinning rooms, the ovens, the soldering rooms (and that great artist the head solderer who drew a salary of £300 a year), the shrimp sauce and tomato sauce vats, the fertiliser plant, the meat departments (which were simple and clean, and entirely unlike the elaborate nastiness of the Chicago canning places if Mr. Upton Sinclair writes facts), and was bored to utter weariness till Florance, in the middle of an elaborate disquisition on the beauties of some process whereby the bully beef and the vegetables amalgamated, caught the look on his face and burst out laughing. 'My dear chap,' said he, 'you've had enough of this.'

'Good Lord! yes,' said Ralph, frankly bored to extinction. 'I say, have you to look round here much, or is this a side show for you?'

'Oh, our managers do most of it now,' said Florance. 'But come on into the office and have a whisky-and-soda. By the bye, if you—and I think you said you had a brother down here with you—if you and he will dine with me—let's see, to-morrow, I shall be very pleased. The governor's sure to ask you, but I bag first.'

'Delighted,' said Ralph. 'Where? and what time?'

'Ness Lodge, North Town,' said Florance. 'Seventy-three. Now come and see the governor.'

Another dinner engagement was made with Ford senior, and Ralph left with good feeling and hearty compliments on both sides. He liked the old man despite his roughness, and Florance's obtrusive caution and Jewish keenness of look and manner amused him. He wondered if Fanny would manage to be at both functions. He had no doubt that he would meet her at Florance's. She had practically promised to see to that. Then he laughed out loud as he walked down the hill to the South Town. What would Cradock say to these dinners? He had accepted for him. Well, he must make the best of it, and give up his Whiteley girl for the sake of a good dinner and an amusing evening. For the mere look of William had been a guarantee of the dinner at his house. As for Florance, well, they must both chance their luck, and so far as he, Ralph, was concerned, there at any rate he was certain of having Fanny. And by now he was beginning to think a good deal more of Fanny than he had ever thought of any girl in his life before.

CHAPTER V

A DINNER AT THE NESS LODGE

NESS LODGE, North Town, was far from being an imposing residence. One glance at the exterior was enough to assure Ralph that however wealthy William Ford might be, he kept the lion's share of the profits of the firm in his own hands. Ness Lodge was, in fact, merely one of a row of semi-detached 'villas.' The architect's eye appraised them at about sixty pounds per annum, but then the architect's eye did not understand that this rental represented an outlay of nearly one hundred pounds a year, so crippling had the rates of Trawlhaven become of recent years. Still, one hundred pounds a year is little enough for the rent of the residence of even a junior member of the firm of Ford and Son.

'There's a bit of Uncle Bob about the old man, I expect,' said Ralph, with a chuckle, to Cradock, as the two brothers waited for their ring to be answered.

Within the house there was consternation. A certain German-Jew slop-seller had, by dint of sharp practice and unfair dealing, made a strong position for himself on the fish market. His real name was

Breitstein, but he called himself Saunders. He had had considerable dealings with the Ford firm, and, with the limitless impudence, the invincible pertinacity of his race, he had determined to force a way into the inner circle of Trawlhaven municipal affairs, and into a better social set than he could claim as yet, by means of Florance. The old man was too hard a nut for him to crack, but he thought he could work Florance.

He was a short, thick-set man, with close-cropped bristly whiskers and beard, black, with grey streaks. His eyes were dark, small and piggish, and hidden behind gilt-rimmed spectacles. His lips were thick and sensual, his nose coarse and racial, his forehead low and narrow, and his general contour of features so pinched and rough-hewn that he was more like a bearded gorilla than a man. He had himself brought a magnificent turbot up to Ness Lodge, and poor silly Nellie was so pleased with the gift that she asked him to stay till her husband got home from the works. Florance found him in his tiny drawing-room, going through the quaint antics of his class when they wish to please. Most Jews are 'stickers,' and this Jew had less gentlemanly feeling than many of his race. He meant to be able to say he had dined with Florance, and he made his intention so clear, that Florance could only have got rid of him by plainly asking him to go. And he was a power on the fish market, and his friendship or enmity might make a considerable

difference to the Fords. Nevertheless, Florance fidgeted. He had not told the D'Esterres not to dress. He must make one effort to rid himself of this slop-selling fish salesman with the guttural voice.

'I hope you won't mind, Saunders,' said he. 'We've got a little dinner on to-night. You must excuse my wife and myself while we go up to dress.'

'Oh, dot vos no madder,' said Saunders, equably; 'I vill loog ad de pigdures aboud ze room. And zese friendts of yours, I shall pe bleased do mage deir aguaindance. I shall nod insold zem, and zey vill nod insold me! Ach zo?'

It was one of the Jew's favourite expressions to say, 'I have no wish to insult you, nor to be insulted by you.' He thought it was an idiomatic phrase, expressing a wish to be both polite and friendly. It had been used to him first by a jolly fish buyer, who prefaced an explanation of what he thought of the Jew's methods with these words, and Saunders had understood neither the preface nor the explanation, but thought the preface sounded well.

Florance gazed at him hopelessly. 'You wouldn't like to go home to dress?' he asked.

'Pud I am tressed,' said Saunders, getting up and showing his morning coat, and pointing to the ruby and brilliant pin which he wore in a scarlet necktie.

'Oh, all right then,' said Florance. 'Come along, Nellie, we've no time to lose.'

'Wasn't it kind of him to bring the turbot, dear?' said guileless Nellie. 'I believe I should have forgotten all about the fish. I went down to the town to order it, but I met Dr. Ap Jones, and he took me into Herrick's and gave me some macaroons and chocolate. Oh, I had such a ripping time. But the doctor said I wasn't to let Mrs. Ap Jones know. He! he!' She giggled cheerfully, thinking that she had done entirely the right thing in inviting Saunders to stay till her husband came home.

'I asked him if he wanted any tea,' she continued. 'But he said no, but might he have a whisky-and-soda. He was quite pleasant and nice. I thought you didn't like him.'

'Good Lord, Nellie,' cried Florance, 'do you?'

'Oh, I don't think he's half bad,' said Nellie, putting her head on one side. 'But, of course, it's rather a pity he should be here to-night when we have arranged the dinner especially for Fanny's sake. You remember what she told me, don't you?'

'You've told me five times,' said Florance. 'Of course I remember. As for that hog Saunders I can't afford to "insold" him, as he says. But you must do your best to keep his mouth full. If the D'Esterres thought that he was a fair sample of our friends and acquaintances, I think it would frighten 'em off at once. I shall have to get 'em aside and explain.'

'There are two of them, you know, dear,' said Nellie,

again holding her head on one side, and looking at her silly characterless features in the glass with perfect complacency. 'I hope we shall have a ripping time.'

'Here! Where the devil's my collar stud?' cried Florance through the door of his dressing-room; and the business of dressing grew paramount.

'Lor a massy me,' said the parlour-maid in the hall, when Ralph and Cradock crushed their opera hats and laid them down. Evening dress was familiar enough to the girl. But 'Gibus' great invention had not come her way. The hall was nothing more than a narrow passage, so narrow indeed that the hat and umbrella stand made it difficult for a large man to get along. Ralph slipped by easily enough, but Cradock caught a pocket on the stand, and hesitated a moment in order to express his thoughts silently.

'Hope we're not late,' drawled Ralph, as he was ushered into the tiny drawing-room, where he found his host and hostess, and Fanny, together with a man in morning costume, who looked like a monkey with a mouth full of nuts, waiting to receive him and his brother.

It had been arranged between Fanny and Ralph that they should meet as strangers.

'Not a bit,' said Florance, genially. 'Let me introduce you to my wife, Mr. —er—er. I think you'd better do the naming, don't ye know. I don't think you told me your brother's Christian name.'

‘Oh, Cradock,’ said Ralph, bowing with his usual indolent grace. ‘My name’s Ralph D’Esterre, at your feet,’ he added, looking at his hostess, and seeing that she was the sort of woman who invariably fell a victim to his charms.

‘My sister, Fanny Butler,’ said Nellie, laughing, giggling at the exaggerated salute which Ralph had given.

Ralph and Cradock bowed again. Fanny returned their courtesy, discreetly enough, but Ralph saw a twinkle in the heart of her eyes. Nevertheless, despite her short hair, she wore an extremely demure look. Her frock was plain black, relieved with a little white lace, and only open in a narrow ‘V.’ Her skin was white, but her shoulders were too bony to encourage her to wear décolleté frocks.

It did not seem necessary to make Saunders formally known to the other visitors. Florance knew enough of the ways of society to be aware that no one ever introduces each guest all round. But Saunders didn’t. He pressed forward, and held out a podgy hand, which he had not troubled to wash while his host was dressing. The thin black line beneath his nails marked the man.

‘My name vos Sornderth,’ said he; ‘und I vos glad to know you.’

Ralph looked at him. For a moment he was inclined to treat him with a bland disregard of either his words or his presence. Then he remembered that

he did not know his host well enough to be insolent to a fellow guest. But into what company had he got?

'Very good of you,' said he, letting his fingers lie lifeless in the greasy grip of the slop-seller.

Cradock nodded abruptly to him. He was talking to Fanny, who was in the highest spirits, excited, eager, vivacious.

'Dinner is served,' said the parlour-maid. She was a little anxious, because she had taken the opera-hats down to show the cook, and she hoped that the D'Esterres would not notice that they were no longer on the stand in the hall, which they had to pass on their way to the dining-room. But Nellie was giggling, and being extremely confidential on Ralph's arm, and Fanny was fully occupying Cradock's attention, so that the poor girl breathed easily and contentedly as she saw them take their seats round the table.

Nellie could not chaff, but she could languish. She knew from Fanny that she, Fanny, had hopes of bringing Ralph to the scratch, so she placed him on her right and Fanny next him; on her left came Cradock and then Saunders.

Saunders took up his serviette to the soup, and stuffed it under his collar. 'De soup on the shirt it is no consequence,' he confided to Cradock. 'It vash out. But on ze vest it spoil ze stoff.'

'Indeed?' said Ralph.

'Oh, you really ought to go and see it,' said Nellie,

beaming on Cradock. 'I think Forbes Fortescue is a darling. I quite fell in love with him. Didn't I, Florance?'

'What's that, Nell?' said Florance. 'Who's the latest?'

'Te he,' giggled Nellie. 'I was telling Mr. Cradock that he really ought to go to the theatre this week. Forbes Fortescue is simply splendid in *Blue Murder*, or *The Countess's Crime*, isn't he?'

'You know my wife always falls in love with every fat beast of a mummer that comes down here, Mr. D'Esterre,' said Florance.

'Indeed?' asked Cradock, without evincing the slightest interest.

'Yes! It's quite true,' cried Nellie, coyly. 'Don't you think I'm silly, Mr. D'Esterre?'

'Ah, Mrs. Ford,' said Ralph, on the other side, with a quiet glance at Fanny. 'If it were the other way about, now, I could understand it. But really I find it hard to believe that you waste so much good material on paints, pads, and stuffing.'

'He! he! he!' giggled Nellie. 'But I *do* think some of them are so handsome!'

'Dot turbot,' said Saunders, as the maid placed the noble twenty pound fish before her master, 'dot turbot vos in der votter last night. Der Daneshire Duchess trawled him op shoost pefore she stard for pord. It vos von of der most pewtiful feesh what effer I saw upon

der marget. Und der lobsters for der sauce vos alive ven I pring him up do my goot friendt's dis afternoon.'

'Most kind of you, most kind of you,' said Florance hurriedly. He thanked God silently that Saunders would not be able to appear as the generous donor of anything else.

'Ah, er,' said Ralph, looking across the table at the Jew, 'did *you* catch it?'

'No, no,' said Saunders, taking the question in all earnestness. 'I puy him on der marget. I have an offise dere. Yah! He vos a vine fish. A liddle of der fin for me if you blease Fordt! It vos glutinous! No?'

The men took their cigars and coffee into the drawing-room with the ladies, but only remained there long enough to enable the servants to clear the table in the dining-room. For in the dining-room was the fine oblong Broadwood grand which had been old Ford's wedding present to his son, and which would not have gone into the drawing-room. And Nellie wished to give Fanny every chance. Fanny's one accomplishment was a certain dexterity in striking the notes of a piano rapidly and evenly. She had discovered this power of hers early, and cultivated it as well as she could by means of persevering practice from recognised exercise books. Neither Nellie nor Florance had any musical taste, but both admired the way in which Fanny could flash her fingers about the keys. Ralph and Cradock were no more critical of musical

quality. Fanny would have enjoyed a triumph but for the vulgar Jew slop-seller, whose one artistic taste lay in music.

‘Dot vos a fine piano,’ said he when Fanny opened it, and struck a few preliminary chords. ‘If you should vant to sell at any time, my friendt, I gif you von hunnert pounds for him. Von of the old wood pianos, de old seasoned walnot of Broatwoot. Dere is noddings bedder.’

Ralph rose to ‘turn over.’ But Fanny waved him back. She skirmished up and down the keyboard, and crashed into Liszt’s setting of Schubert’s *Erl King*. It is a magnificently showy arrangement, and its technical difficulties rarely allow the amateur to give any attention to anything more than digital dexterity.

Ralph admired the performance immensely. It raised the girl in his estimation. Here was an asset of which any woman might feel proud. For the first time he began to think it possible that he might ask her to be his wife.

Saunders nodded his head patronisingly. ‘Dot vos cleffer fingering,’ said he. ‘Pud my tear yonk laty blease blay some music. Blay somedings to mage me gry.’

Fanny was so really unmusical that she had no idea how flat and uninteresting her interpretation of any movement with colour or passion was. She dared to open her Beethoven sonatas at the C minor, op. 111.

‘Ach mine Gott,’ said the Jew when she began that

wonderful swan song of the largo. 'Mine liddle daughter Rachel, I means Evelyn, gan put more music indo id dan dat. I bek you blay a presto. And motern music. Dot vos your metier.'

For a moment Fanny looked as if she would cry. She brought her hands crashing down in a discord, and left it unresolved, so that the Jew raised his fingers to his ears and made a piteous grimace. But then she caught the expression of furious indignation on Ralph's face, and saw that the true criticism which had wounded her had done her more good than harm.

Florance could have kicked Saunders, but dared not. He, unconscious that he had done or said anything out of the way, continued a long dissertation on the art of piano playing. He even gave uninvited illustrations on the Broadwood to support his contention. But the time dragged slowly to ten o'clock, and the consumption of a good deal of whisky was necessary. Even then Saunders still held forth on great players whom he had heard. Ralph was sitting with Fanny in a cosy corner. 'I say,' he said, 'I can't stand this Jew much longer. May I walk home with you?'

'Oh,' said Fanny. 'But I'm living here for the present.' She had arranged that she should stay the night at Ness Lodge. She did not wish even yet to let Ralph into the secret of the boarding-house, and if he had insisted on accompanying her home, the 'Pontine Boarding Establishment' on the huge brass plate

must have given the secret away. Hitherto she had always excused herself from walking in the streets at all with Ralph on the ground that she could not explain her acquaintance with him to any of her friends whom she might meet. Now that excuse was gone. Matters were getting to a crisis. She must either hook her fish or run the risk of losing him.

‘But you’ll meet me on the pier to-morrow,’ he said. ‘Look here, do you think your sister would chaperon you if I asked you and her to come for a sail to Solebeach?’

‘Will your brother be there?’ asked Fanny, knowing very well that Nellie would go anywhere if there was a chance of the harmless uninteresting flirtation which she loved.

‘Of course, if you like,’ said Ralph.

‘Try,’ whispered Fanny.

So it was arranged that on the following morning the two sisters would be at the harbour yachting wharf a little before eleven o’clock. Florance Ford had not the faintest objection to his wife’s spending a day on the water with her sister and the two D’Esterres. The nurse could look after the children, and Nellie, despite her idiotic fictitious amours, could very well look after herself. It was a chance for Fanny, and Florance would be only too pleased to see his sister-in-law well married and off his hands.

‘I vos sorry I gould nod gome doo,’ said Saunders

politely, believing that he had made himself charming to everybody. 'Bot I expegt dwo steamers and dree or vour odder boats in, and I haf to watch der prices.'

'Then if the wind is right, it's settled,' said Ralph.

Fanny managed to be alone with him for just one moment, while the others were out in the hall preparatory to the departure of the three guests. 'You will come,' whispered Ralph. He had dined well, and Florance had seen to it that the wine was good and well pushed, and that the post-prandial whisky was equally tempting. Ralph was moved a little out of his normal apathy. His eyes shone with a fire which was unusual in them. He held Fanny's hand as he spoke, and his face was very near hers.

'Yes,' she whispered softly. 'Of course I will.'

Her eyes held his, and there was a little alluring sprite in each of them. Her lips were pursed prettily, her head a little thrown back. The narrow 'V' of her dress permitted the merest glimpse of the white promise of her bosom. She had that curious charm of an anæmic woman, whose lack of blood is compensated for by a force of spirit.

'Fanny,' whispered Ralph.

She gave a little gasping sigh, and, as his lips touched hers, she breathed the soul of her longing into him. The kiss was quick, but fervent.

Ralph's heart beat with a new sense of triumph when he took his formal farewells at the door.

CHAPTER VI

A PREGNANT DECISION

'It's all very well for you,' grumbled Cradock as he and Ralph superintended the portage of a hamper of provisions from the *maison Herrick* to the twenty-foot half-decked cutter which had been chartered for the trip to Solebeach. 'You've got Miss Butler. But I'd promised to take out my gal over to Mereby to-day. She'll be beastly sick when I don't turn up.'

'You *must* come, old chap,' said Ralph. 'You'll have to take Mrs. Ford off my hands. Make the best of her.'

Cradock was still sulking when the two brothers heard the sound of quick trotting footsteps behind them. 'Goot morning, Misder D'Esterre,' said the voice of the great Breitstein, I beg his pardon, Saunders. 'Ach!' he added, with a wink to Ralph that must have strained his spectacles.

'Morning,' said Cradock. Ralph nodded, and was proceeding to walk on when Saunders laid his hand on his arm. The young fellows had taken little care to conceal the repugnance with which Saunders filled

them, and his little pig eyes were not wont to miss much. Very well. He had accosted them with the friendliest intentions. If they liked to put on side, D'Esterre or no D'Esterre, he would enjoy playing on it. His hide was so thick that he did not feel hurt by any affront. But his racial prejudices made him delight in taking down a Gentile, especially a Gentile who did not recognise that he, Saunders, was a notable man, a man worthy of respect in that he could make himself extremely nasty when he chose.

'Ach, Misder D'Esterre,' said Saunders again, holding Ralph's sleeve while Cradock went on. 'You vos an enderpricing yonk man! Vot dit I see drough der toor last night at der house of my goot friendt Fordt? Ach ha! Yonk men vill pe yonk men! But I onterstoot as you hat not med die laty before! Ach! You vos enterpricing inteet! She mage lof better as she play der piano. Der vos more fire in her libs dan in her fingers? Ach! id is goot to be yonk!'

Ralph shook the hand from his sleeve as though he were brushing off some obscene insect. He still drawled when he spoke, but there was an edge to his voice which warned the shrewd Jew to be careful.

'I fear you have the advantage of me, sir,' said Ralph. 'I am totally unable to inform you what you saw which is of any interest to me or to any one else.'

'It vos vary vell tone,' said Saunders, nodding his head approvingly. 'You can put up der bluff goot.

Bud vos der lips soft, mine friendt? Vos die laty kind? I see drough der toor as she closed her eyes vile you kissed her.'

Ralph's brain worked swiftly. He would have liked to summon the strength which he held in reserve and to pitch this oily Hebrew into the rank waters of the harbour. But he had Fanny's name to consider. Florance had sketched Saunders and his desires to him during a moment of brief opportunity on the previous evening. He must not let this toad-like creature go spitting his venom on Fanny.

He tried the genial companion on the Jew. 'Well,' said he, 'I suppose you've kissed a girl in your time. But what the deuce were your eyes doing peering where they weren't wanted? Hang it, man, it isn't the game to spoil sport!'

Saunders flattered himself that he had gone the right way to work to win Ralph to his social interests. 'Bud it is serious,' he said. 'Die laty would lose her garagter if it vos knowed.'

Ralph made a quick decision. He had perhaps gone a little further on the previous evening than he had meant to do. But he was really taken with the girl. She roused his sluggish blood more than any girl he had ever met. His uncle could not object to his marriage with the sister-in-law of the son of the firm of Ford & Son. If he did—well he would at all events have done all he could as a gentleman to protect the

girl's name. And there were gentlemanly instincts in Ralph.

'Look here,' said he, 'if any one has anything to say about my future wife's character they'd better say it to me. See? You can take that to yourself Mr. Saunders Isaacs, or whatever your name is, and be damned to you.'

As soon as he had decided to offer himself to Fanny, he threw away all pretence of civility towards Saunders. He could not affront the man in Ford's house. But he was not going to be hung up with a filthy acquaintance of that sort without some very good reason, and by announcing his engagement to Fanny he did away with any shred of reason for propitiating Saunders. Possibly she would refuse him. But his vanity would not let him regard that as a probability.

Saunders stopped and gasped. Had he been mistaken? Had he not seen this man introduced to the very girl whom he now claimed as his future wife, on the very night before?

'Bud,' he said, 'you dit nod know her before . . .'

'You lie, sir,' said Ralph. 'Now you know what I have told you. If I hear of any scandal I shall attribute it to you, and shall take very good care to make you pay for it. Mind that.'

But for the threat of his eye, his listlessness of manner might have deceived Saunders into thinking

that he was not in earnest. But there was a shimmer beneath those half-closed eyelids which warned the Jew that this man Ralph would prove a dangerous enemy. And he could see no advantage, pecuniary or social, in making him an enemy.

'I gongradulade you and peg your bardon,' he said, removing the stiff bowler hat which he wore. 'And I grongradulade die laty also. I vish you effery habbiness. It is no segred? What?'

Ralph knew that if he asked for secrecy the whole thing would be discredited, and he might do harm to the woman whom he had now decided to ask to be his wife. He must risk being previous.

'Certainly not,' he said. 'Of course many people don't know it yet. But there's no secret about it.'

'Ach!' said Saunders. 'I peg your bardon akain. Goot morning.'

He went off on his way to the market. He did not believe the tale he had heard, but he did not see his way to act as if he disbelieved it. He did not like the reptilian gleam beneath those half-closed eye-lids. He had seen it in women of his own race, and he knew its deadly import.

Ralph had food for thought as he followed Cradock down to the wharf, against which the boat which had been chartered for the day's excursion was moored. He was in for it now. He could not back out of the proposal and leave himself a shred of honour. By his

impromptu declaration of betrothal he had placed it in Fanny's power to marry him. Well (and his face cleared as he thought), after all he might do much worse. Ralph was not an experienced man of the world, though he thought he was. He knew little of the dodges and pretences of the needy feminine to attract to herself a husband in comfortable circumstances. He had seen Fanny treated as one of the family at the house of the junior member of the great firm of Ford & Son, and though Florance made but little show of riches in his domestic establishment, there was no doubt that the firm itself was in a flourishing condition, and that he, Florance, was the only child of the senior member of it. He did not stop to ask himself why Fanny was so reticent concerning her father and mother. It hardly occurred to him as curious that all she had said was that her father was an artist—and, in these days, an artist can claim equality in social position with any herring-packer or ginger-monger in the world. No doubt Fanny was not wealthy, but she would probably have something, and the relationship with the Fords could not but be pleasing to Robert Bear. His face was brighter, and he was chuckling over his victory in the encounter with Saunders when he reached the little half-decked cutter, which lay at the steps, head to wind, her main's'l set but bulging loose with a taut topping lift and elevated boom. The sail swayed and sagged from

side to side, but never filled. The forecanvas obviously consisted of the one big jib beloved of the shrimpers and river yachtsmen, and not of the jib and fores'l, more business-like and serviceable in a breeze. But that would not matter. The light westerly breeze was but a zephyr, and not a craft in the offing, from tiny half-rater yacht (venturing outside the bar but hovering round the harbour mouth) to the gallant brown-sailed trawler, but carried every stitch of sail in her locker. The tide was early flood and they would get the ebb back from Solebeach.

The owner of the boat was a jovial-looking old fellow named Billy Boyes, commonly known as 'Billy-boy.' He was short and very thick set, and in spite of the warmth of the day he was swathed in many woollen vestments. His blue jersey was a triumph knitted by a Scotch girl during the last kippering season. His thick blue trousers were stiff with stout material. His coat was resplendent with mighty brass buttons. A mariner to take the eye of any land-lubber. Yet there were those about the wharf who looked askance at old Billy, and said that he ought not to be licensed to take passengers. They said he was a careless old rascal, especially when he had had a drop of beer, and that one day there would be an accident and then the more deserving, if less showy, boatmen might stand a better chance. But there is much jealousy and rivalry among the harbour boatmen at

Trawlhaven—and for the matter of that at other seaside resorts too—and perhaps the prognostications of the envious were not to be relied upon overmuch.

‘Moarnin’ master,’ said Billyboy, as Ralph looked down into the boat. ‘A bewtiful moarnin’ yew ha’ got for yar sail ta be sure! But the bare hain’t come aboard yit.’

‘Hang it,’ said Cradock, ‘I forgot the beer. I’m glad you reminded me, Billy. I shall want some myself before we get to Solebeach.’

‘Lor, that doan’t sigerfy,’ said Billy. ‘Jest yew gi’e me half-a-crown an’ I’ll sune run an’ git a bartle. Ha’e ye got any glasses, or shall us git a mug or tew?’

‘There are glasses in the hamper, I think,’ said Cradock. ‘But you may as well bring something else.’

He handed him a half-crown, and Billy went off to get his gallon. ‘Ha’e ye got a drop o’ sparruts, in case the ladies should come on a bit quare?’ he asked.

‘Yes, that’s all right,’ said Cradock. ‘There’s a bottle of Hennessey’s three star brandy. But they are old sailors, they tell me. Mr. Ford has got a motor boat, and they often go out in that.’

Old Billy clambered up to the land from the bowsprit, not deigning to make use of the steps.

‘I say, Crad,’ said Ralph, as soon as the old fellow was out of the way. ‘I want you to act as watch-dog. Keep off Billy and Mrs. Ford as much as possible.’

I've made up my mind to ask Miss Butler to marry me, and I should like to do it on the boat if I get a chance.'

'The devil you would,' said Cradock. 'Well, I wish you luck.'

'What's the row?' asked Ralph, who fancied there was something strange in his brother's manner.

'Nothing that I know of,' said Cradock. 'Oh, here they come.'

Indeed, he did not know what was the matter. But when Ralph said that he intended to ask Fanny to be his wife a faintness, such as he had never known before, seemed to pass over the younger brother. What on earth did it matter to him that Ralph wished to marry this girl? Was he so jealous of his brother's love as all that? He knew that he was not. Why then did he turn hot and cold, feel sick and faint at the news. Surely this little rocking motion of the harbour was not making him sea-sick. He had never experienced any discomfort at sea before. But then he was not used to sailing in small boats. Neither he nor Ralph were yachtsmen, and neither knew anything of the art of sailing. It came as a surprise to them to learn that sailing craft could go in more than one direction in one wind. They thought that the only course possible was dead before the wind, and it was in asking about the craft tacking in and out in the roads that they had first made old Billy's acquaintance, and

learned many things not only strange to them but to every one else.

If it was not sea-sickness what was it? He was even less a man of the world, less experienced than Ralph. He could not find the answer to his riddle, which Fanny would have guessed in a moment.

Yes. There they came. Fanny and Nellie were both dressed for the occasion in blue serge with white piping, and with business-like sailor hats made fast by motor veils and innumerable hat-pins. Nellie was rather fond of going out with Florance in his motor launch, and Fanny was a good sailor. There was an abandon about Fanny which was not so pronounced as to fail to be attractive. She waved her parasol as she saw the heads of the D'Esterres over the edge of the quay side. Nellie came along tittering, her insipid, expressionless face puckered into meaningless smiles. She was bent on having 'a ripping time,' for even if she were bound to leave Fanny to do her best with Ralph there was Cradock, and Cradock was the finer built man of the two, if he had less delicate beauty than his brother. Nellie's weakness rather preferred the beauty of strength, whether of body or mind. She felt that she might indulge in one of her usual harmless, senseless flirtations with Cradock. Oh yes. She would have a 'ripping time.'

'Here we are!' cried Fanny, gaily. 'What a lovely day, isn't it? We might have had a breath more

wind, but I dare say it will get up a bit before twelve o'clock. Did you think we were never coming?'

Ralph and Cradock sprang out of the boat to the quay and greeted the two ladies. Both looked well in flannels, and women never know the signification of colours, so that the fact that the colours of the scarves and ties were of some petty city so-called yacht club (not a half per cent. of the members of which possessed so much as a punt) did not worry them.

'Why, it's old Billyboy's boat,' said Fanny, laughing. 'Have you made the acquaintance of our local notoriety already. He can spin the tallest yarns of any longshoreman for miles round. I'm glad you've got him. He's always fun.'

'Hare we be,' said Billy, appearing with a huge bottle. He had thought it better to get two gallons of mild beer instead of one of bitter. He preferred it himself, and there was more of it. 'Moarnin', Miss, Moarnin', Mam. Theer lay the Larlyne.' He pointed to the *Lurline*, Ford's motor launch, which lay against the yacht club hard, covered in with her oily. 'Well, yew'll hev moor spoort aboard the Meery cutter 'an if yew wuz aboard that little gaspin' critter.'

Billy swung himself and his beer into the stern sheets of the boat and helped down the passengers. Then he made his usual joke. 'I hope as yew can all on ye swim,' he said. 'This hare's a little titty boot.'

Hor! Hor! Hor! I ha' had gals a skreekin' as ta worn't saafe oover an' oover agin.'

The old fellow danced heavily about the floor boards of the *Mary*, and that stout, broad-beamed craft scarcely condescended to wobble at her moorings. It required the eye of an expert to see the height of her mast and the length of her gaff and boom. Her huge balloon-jib lay in mighty folds on the half-deck. But to Ralph and Cradock and their party the boat seemed as safe as an ironclad.

'Don't frighten us, Billy,' said Fanny. 'I can swim.'

'I can't,' said Billy. 'Hor! Hor! Hor!'

Cradock looked up and laughed. 'I'll undertake to fish one ashore,' said he.

Ralph said nothing. He could take two or three strokes and that was all. Nellie laughed. She couldn't swim and did not want to learn the art.

'Hor! Hor! Hor!' said Billy again. 'Shall us be a gittin' unner way? Set yew down theer, all on ye, till we git outside the harbour and then yew can muve about a bit. That'll be reachin' on the stab-boord tack the whool o' the way. Mind yar hids wi' that theer bume.'

The two young men and their guests seated themselves in the roomy stern sheets and ducked their heads four feet below the swing of the boom. Billy unhitched his mooring ropes, shoved the *Mary's* head round by thrusting against the quayside with his great

hands, and, seizing the jib halyards, ran up the sail with the indispensable 'Oh-ho-oh, oh-ho-oh.' He belayed the halyards, drew on the lee sheet, ran aft to the tiller and belayed the main sheet, and the *Mary* slowly headed for the bar, with the wind dead abaft. As she swung round the mains'l took the wind out of her jib and it flapped lazily, dabbling its sheets in the water. The boom swung out at right angles, and Billy held the sheet now till he shoved the tiller down as soon as the boat cleared the pier heads. The light breeze came abeam, the main sheet was drawn and (oh, shame to a sailor man who should have known better) belayed. The jib sheet was still belayed and the sail filled. Another ahoy or two (while Cradock held the tiller amidships under Billy's directions) and the jib-headed tops'l ran up its dainty peak.

'Now yew can saddle yarselves wheer ye like,' said Billy. 'She oan't jibe agin afoor Solebeach.'

It is human perversity, I suppose, that always makes the inexperienced in sailing think the lee side the more comfortable. On the lee side it is possible to lean back against the sides of the boat and languish. Nellie liked to languish. She rested her back and gave to the sway of the cutter as the gentle motion of the sea rocked her. Soon all four passengers were to leeward. But the boat was large, the wind light. The *Mary* sailed swiftly on, with the tide under her, on almost an even keel.

CHAPTER VII

RALPH PROPOSES AND GOD DISPOSES

FANNY and Nellie had a long discussion after the guests had gone on the previous night. From almost the first Fanny had kept her sister well advised as to the progress of the flirtation which had begun, with such seaside irregularity, on the pier that night of the regatta, and Nellie had agreed that it was well worth while to countenance the matrimonial venture. Neither dared to take Florance entirely into their confidence in the matter. Florance had some provincial prejudices which influenced him at all times. The women only permitted themselves to be guided by prejudice when it was to their own advantage, or to the detriment of a friend or neighbour. Thus it happened that Fanny and Nellie had to decide for themselves as to the desirability of Ralph D'Esterre as a husband. They decided after the manner of their kind. Fanny was inclined to feel some contempt for the effeminacy of Ralph. Cradock would have appealed to her more than did his brother. Yet she felt the fascination of the lady-killer, the finely developed fascination of the

man whose chief business in life it had been to make himself agreeable at the afternoon-tea-table. Ralph was the elder of the brothers—and, any way, as yet Cradock had shown no signs of being attracted by Fanny. She and Nellie came to the conclusion that, inasmuch as Ralph had brought an introduction from Robert Bear, which corroborated his claim to be the nephew of the great man, he was 'good enough' as a match. And Fanny was very very tired of the eternal boarding-house routine, and delighted in the revolt from it which her hopes of making a successful match encouraged her to persist in.

'I think Florance might have taken us out in his launch,' said Fanny. 'It looks so funny for us to have to accept an invitation to a hired boat when there is the *Lurline* lying idle.'

'He knows his own business best, my dear,' said Nellie placidly. 'You may be sure he has your prosperity at heart. All you've got to do is to make yourself as nice as possible to the man. I'm sure he's booked. I saw it last night.'

The plan of campaign was religiously followed aboard the *Mary*. Nellie did her silly best to keep Cradock to herself, and to distract Billyboy's attention by a series of questions which did not interest any one in the least, but which kept the old boy's tongue on the move and his brain on the work.

It was a beautiful peaceful morning. But for the

incessant jabber of Nellie, Billyboy might have wondered why there were so few shrimpers and pleasure boats out. He had been late down to the harbour to keep his engagement with Ralph and had not troubled to look at the glass that morning. Here he was, sailing in the lightest and most pleasant of westerly breezes with a hamper full of grub and a two-gallon bottle full of beer, with a pleasant-mannered 'laady' talking to him, and with a whole day's pay (put by himself at a guinea) ready for him on the return from Solebeach.

'Dee ye mind a bit o' bocca, ma'am?' he asked, as he produced his well-blackened clay and stuffed it with some real 'ship's' which he had cadged from a warrant officer of the Fishery protection gunboat then in harbour.

He lit his pipe, and threw his legs up easily on the stern-sheets bench which ran round beneath the tiller.

In the meantime Ralph had gradually isolated Fanny and himself from the rest of the boat. Under pretence of looking at the working of the jib-sheet blocks and the forepeak beneath the half-deck for'ard he had drawn her as far for'ard as the mast, and the two were standing, the man to starboard and the girl to port, leaning over the half-deck, their backs turned to the stern sheets.

Fanny's hands were stretched out upon the deck

planking. Ralph reached out round the mast and put his own hands over the girl's.

'Fanny,' he said.

'Oh, hush,' whispered the girl. 'They'll hear you.'

'Let 'em,' said Ralph, his young blood warming at the soft touch of her skin, the tingling of the sun, the *joie de vivre* of the delicious morning at sea. 'Fanny,' he said again, 'I love you. Do you love me?'

Fanny withdrew her hands from his, leant back a little so that she could see aft of the mast and looked at him. He followed her gaze, and also drew back so that he could cross eyes with her under the jaws of the boom.

'Fanny,' he whispered again (and as he spoke he bent his head till his brow touched the lacing of the mains'l), 'I love you. I wouldn't dare to ask you yet, but that brute Saunders saw me kiss you last night and had the cheek to speak of it this morning. It only makes me put my happiness to the touch prematurely. I love you, dear. Will you marry me?'

It required a great effort on the part of the girl to keep from sending a message to her sister. Despite her utmost endeavours she was unable to keep from looking aft towards the stern sheets. But Nellie was busy having 'a ripping time' with Cradock, so that her sister's glance of triumph passed unnoticed by her and by Ralph.

‘But,’ lisped Fanny, with a charming hesitation, ‘but we know so little of each other.’

Ralph knew it, and was not ardent lover enough to be able to forget it or deny it. ‘But, my dear, my dear,’ he said with fervour, ‘there is nothing else to be done. I would not have asked you so soon but for Saunders. But,’ he added, as Fanny’s hesitancy spurred his vanity on, ‘after all, why should we wait if you love me. I can’t grow to love you more. Oh, Fanny dear, say you will marry me and—oh, then, we can tell Mrs. Ford, and go back and defy all the Saunderses in the world.’

He remembered, in time to make him press his suit with exceptional eagerness, that if the girl refused him he would look a most infernal fool to all those whom Saunders had told of the engagement he had announced. He *must* marry her now.

‘It isn’t for what that man thinks or says,’ said Fanny, again laying her hands on the foredeck. ‘But—Ralph—do you think you know your own mind? We women make up our minds quickly. It is not so with men, I have heard. For God’s sake don’t ask me to marry you out of mere courtesy, out of a mere wish to save me from scandal. There is only one thing to justify you in proposing to me so soon, that you really feel you love me. Oh, Ralph, do you?’

She was very clever, very clever indeed. Every

word she said bound him faster and faster to her. Every syllable which came from her lips made her more and more desirable in his eyes.

‘Yes, yes,’ he cried (and Cradock heard his words, and again felt a queer sickness come over him); ‘you know I do. Oh, say “yes”—that is all. My darling say “yes,” and then let me tell the others.’

Fanny looked with her great dark eyes beneath the boom, and he read his answer there. But he waited for her to speak. ‘Yes,’ she said, and turning her hand over so that it lay back downwards, she pressed his resting upon hers.

For a moment the two were in love with each other. For a moment they looked into each other’s eyes with that fierce yearning of passion which cannot be simulated. Then Ralph turned and looked aft. He might as well announce the engagement at once. Old Billyboy was so far apart in the social conventions of the world that he need not be taken into consideration.

But old Billyboy had come to the conclusion that he was ‘dry,’ and that it was high time that the two-gallon bottle should have its cork drawn.

The cutter was now sailing full and by, heading a little outward to clear the spit of sand which runs out at the Hythe to the south of Trawlhaven. There was no ripple on the water, a gentle rocking motion came in from the North Sea, but on the beach the waves lapped and hissed—no more than that. The cliffs hid

the horizon to the westward. Now and then a grey wisp of cloud drifted out to sea as though it had lost its way in that clear blue. The sun did not yet come 'off' the land, but sent a blinding glow from for'ard, so that the shadow of the mast and sail fell aft across the stern sheets.

Old Billy had his main sheet made fast and his jib sheet firmly belayed. There are still one or two long-shoremen who have not paid the penalty for this inexcusable negligence.

The old fellow said to Cradock, just as Ralph turned and looked aft, 'Take yew hold o' the tiller for jest a min't moment, an' hold har stiddy.'

Cradock was rather proud of his commission, and took the tiller in his hand. But old Billy still rested his thigh against the lever.

Then Billy placed his hands together, the fingers straight and touching each other, one little finger on the top of the first finger of the other hand, the palms inwards. He lifted his hands till they came between the horizon and the sun. 'I rackon the sun's two hands high,' said he; 'tha 'ss time ta wet the canwas.'

There was a ripple of laughter from the stern sheets as soon as the object of the old fellow's elaborate manœuvring was discovered. And Ralph saw his chance.

'Wait a bit,' said he, making his way astern, and holding on to the stiff rod of the boom as he walked aft, 'you've all got to drink a toast.'

He began to unfasten the hamper.

'What?' cried Cradock.

'Fanny!' called Nelly Ford.

But Fanny continued to lean over the half-deck for'ard, peering ahead. And Ralph busied himself at the hamper.

Quickly he had a bottle of Pommery open and the glasses filled, giving old Billy permission to help himself out of the beer bottle; that estimable man firmly declining to risk his health in such 'fizzy ginger bary stuff' as champagne. 'Now,' said Ralph, standing up and holding on by the main sheet, 'The future Mrs. Ralph D'Esterre.'

Nellie gave that ridiculous crow which women think is a cheer, Cradock let go of the tiller and the boat shot up in the wind, and began to run head on to a sandbank, till Billy swallowed his first glass and got her into her course again. Ralph caught hold of Fanny and brought her aft with him, and the boat was full of congratulations.

The breeze freshened a little, and Billy advised that there should be no landing at Solebeach, so after a casual glimpse at the little town on the top of the cliffs, lunch was got out and eaten while the *Mary* kept steady on the port tack on her return voyage.

And all the time old Billy kept at the beer. He did not trouble much about what he called 'The wittles,' but now that he had once started, the demands

of his throttle were insatiable. And the young men laughed and encouraged him.

Still the breeze freshened gradually, and the sun went in. The clouds began to come out to sea in black masses, with sepia fringes, instead of filmy wisps floating rarely across the clear sky. The wind was still only a nice steady breeze, bringing a pleasant murmur of water against the bows. The windward gunwale was not more than a couple of inches higher than the leeward. The *Mary* was a good sea boat, and 'walked' well. The shelter of the land made a lee for a mile out in the roads, and, despite the freshening wind, the water remained calm, ruffled here and there with the blue roughness of cloud puffs, but not rising in a lift of swell as when the wind comes onshore from the sea. It was about half-past four, and half ebb, when the boat rounded South Hythe and headed a little in with a starboard helm to follow the line of the coast to the pier heads. Though the course now brought her close-hauled she made good way with the tide under her, and, presently, Ralph got out his new Ross prismatic binoculars and passed them round for the others to look at the cluster of folks along the sea-front of Trawlhaven, the bathers, the parties in row boats, and, to the nor'ard of the pier, two sixpenny nauseators heading for port.

'They seem a bit nervous, don't they, Billy?' asked Cradock, who had seen more of the old fellow than the

more effeminate Ralph. 'Why have they got their sails looped up' (he meant 'brailed') 'and that spar at the top' (he meant 'the gaff') 'lowered in that ugly way?'

Old Billy let her sheer as he loosened the cork in the beer bottle with one hand, and, with the same hand, managed to fill and empty two glasses of good brown beer in quick succession. 'I rackon theer's wind a comin'', said he. 'And them craft bain't sa right an' tight as this hare little bewty.'

Indeed from the stern sheets of the *Mary* there seemed no cause for anxiety whatever. Neither Ralph nor Cradock was sailor enough to understand that from the position of the sixpenny pleasure boats it was possible to see further to windward than from the *Mary*, and that those in charge of the cheap passengers could better judge the weather which was coming than could old Billy. Even if old Billy had taken the trouble to cast his eye to windward he was now too magnificent with malt and hops to deign to tie a reef. The sheets were fast belayed, the tops'l still bent and full.

There is a 'score,' or gangway, for the Southcliff lifeboat about a mile and a half to the south'ard of the harbour mouth, and here the cliffs sink to a sort of gully in the grassy downs atop. Naturally there is less shelter from a land wind to seaward at this point, and it was exactly at this point that the squall, which

had long been threatened out of the dead black upheaval of the sky to the nor'-west, backed and came 'full off,' and struck the sails of the *Mary* as with the hammer of Thor. Over she headed to seaward. Over and over. The four passengers as usual were considering their comfort by lying back on the lee side, and the sudden roll of the boat sent them huddled together in a complicated medley, the weight of which sagged dead against the sinking side of the boat. If only the tops'l had given it might have eased her. If only the jib-sheet had not been made fast, Billy might have slacked it off and let the mains'l shoot her up in the wind, so as to take the breeze out of her sails. But the jib was hard and fast, and the kicking bodies of the passengers were in the way of its cleat. Billy, full of beer and a little frightened, did the worst thing he could do. His only course was to hold on to the mainsheet and shove the tiller down, so as to bring her up in the eye of the wind. But he eased the mainsheet, which was belayed beside him, and then, the jib drawing harder and harder, the boat refused to luff, and sagged more and more to seaward, while all the time the sea was pouring in over the lee gunwale. It was all over in five seconds. The mains'l filled again as her jib drew her offshore; she was already half-full of water; she pitched her nose in; the sea came chuckling in over her half-decked bows; her stern-sheets filled to the counter-rail, and down

she went—another boat thrown away by the inexcusable carelessness of the belayed sheet.

Rapidly as she filled and sank there had been time enough for Cradock to catch up a couple of life-belts which lay for'ard against the mast.

'No, no,' said Fanny, to whom he offered one, even as the sea came in; 'I can swim. Give them to Nellie.'

Nellie hastily thrust the belt beneath her arms. Ralph looked ashore. It was a good half mile off, and there was no boat afloat within a mile. 'I can't make it,' he said. He got into the other belt.

'Blust!' cried old Billy. 'Noo moor can't I bor. But I'll find a some'at.'

Then the boat went down. Cradock instinctively caught hold of Fanny, threw her clear of spars and cordage, and leapt after her. They rose to the surface in a second, and looked round them for the others. Ralph and Nellie soon came bobbing up; they, too, had got clear of the wreck, and old Billy came up puffing, blowing, and using language which made the sea quite hot. He had found a couple of cork fenders and a great piece of floor boarding, which rose as the *Mary* sank. Even now the little cutter did not go down to Davy Jones, but drifted, with her masthead out of the water, like some water-logged derelict. 'Blust,' said old Billy again, 'I'll stand by har an' hode on ta har masthid till we're fetched. Go yew on yew lot. I shall fare right enow.'

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'Fanny, Fanny,' cried Ralph; 'are you sure you can swim ashore? I can't bear to let you go without a lifebelt while I am wearing one; it seems so unmanly.'

'My dear boy,' said Fanny, with more salt water in her mouth than she liked; 'be sensible; I can swim well enough to get to land, or to keep afloat till one of those boats picks us up. You can't. It's no time for sentiment, but for common sense. Come along, Cradock.'

She struck out boldly shorewards. Already two boats were being rowed lustily out towards them from the north. But the boats had a good mile to come, and the shore was not more than half a mile distant. Fanny and Cradock, after one last look at the others (and old Billy, with his pipe still in his mouth, squatting half on the floor boards, half buoyed up by the cork fenders, one under each arm, and with one hand resting in the act of benediction on the mast-head of his boat, was a sight to make the angels laugh) commenced a steady rate of stroke.

During the hours on the boat the whole four had grown very intimate. The announcement of the engagement had broken down all reserve. Nellie was never retiring where young men were concerned, and Fanny had fallen into the situation of future wife and future sister-in-law as if she had played the part for years. It had been a merry and jolly party, and

Cradock's heart warmed as he thrust and kicked, kicked and thrust, with the vivacious and bright-eyed Fanny beside him. He looked at her, and saw her swim with one hand while she swept the water and hair from her eyes. She was smiling as he saw her. By jove what pluck the little woman had. Astern, Ralph and Nellie were feebly patting the sea under the impression that they were moving themselves shorewards by so doing. But as the tide swept them to the nor'ard, and out, they looked more ridiculous than sublime. There was a littleness, an air of fatuity, about those bobbing figures which was sufficient to kill romance.

'Are you all right?' asked Cradock soon of the girl who was swimming with him.

This time he thought there was an anxious look on her face. She was taking faster strokes, and he thought that she swam lower in the water. She seemed to gasp a little as she answered him. 'Oh yes,' she answered; 'but I'm not used to swimming fully dressed, and the things are a bit of a drag. I fear I am keeping you back; won't you swim on and leave me?'

And then Cradock knew all at once that he would never leave her—that if she sank he would sink, and that he would risk his life and more than his life if there were anything beyond for the chance of saving her. He had not seen much of her. He had been

under the impression that he rather disapproved of her, her style, her vivacity, and her freedom from the conventional modesty of provincial 'young ladies.' Now he knew that the personal charm of her had drawn his very soul to her. He knew this, and realised simultaneously, that he could never offer the love to her which he felt was far greater than any love which Ralph had it in him to feel for anybody. Well, if they were to die together, it would be a happy death for him. Happier, he thought, than it would be to live to see her the wife of his brother, to be constrained to meet her often, to treat her with the fraternal affection which marriage is believed to create in the hearts of men and women, who are not related by blood in any way, but whose very natures change because their brothers or sisters, their cousins or their aunts, choose to marry, and by such marriage cast a sexless aegis over the respective wives or husbands or deceased wife's half-sister's grandmother's cousins, as the case may be. It's funny, Cradock thought, funny that any one should be fool enough to think that the restraint of blood could ever exercise any influence where the ties or bars of blood are absent. Pah! A smack of salt water caught him in the mouth. He swam stronger and looked around him. The shore still seemed a very long way off, and, low in the water as he was, he could scarce see the leaping bows of the nearest boat hurrying towards

him and his companion. Again he looked at her. She had sensibly fallen astern, and she was very low in the water now. Her face was drawn and white, her lips a little parted, only to close with a gasp when the sea leapt to her mouth. Her eyes were still full of eagerness, of life and the desire to live. But there was no reproach in them for the man who was now swimming ahead of her. She gave a little pitiable smile as though to encourage him. He saw the superb pluck of it, and his heart burned hot within him although the water was now getting chill to his body.

He trod water and waited till she drew alongside. 'Oh, why did you do that?' she gasped. 'Please go on. Oh do.'

'Why, Fanny,' said Cradock (and for all his care she knew what that quavering note in his voice meant), 'what do you think of me! As if I would let any girl drown like this so long as I have strength to keep her up! Least of all my brother's future wife.' He gulped as he said the last words, and then he saw a flame of sympathy glow from Fanny's eyes. 'Ah!' she said, faintly. 'Forgive me. I knew you would not leave me. I knew it.'

'How do you think you would be easiest?' asked the man, passing his left arm under the front buckle of her waistband, and lifting her up so that her chin was well clear of the water. 'Like this? Or will you turn on your back and let me tow you?'

She was very tired now. It had been much further than she fancied, and her clothes handicapped her far more than she had expected. Her skirt clung about her legs so that she could not kick out wide and forcibly. Her limbs were numbed and chill. Alone she could not have struggled on another twenty yards.

‘O Cradock,’ she murmured, ‘you are risking your life for mine, and perhaps we shall both go down.’

‘I hope so,’ rose to Cradock’s lips, but he checked the words, and tried to speak cheerily. ‘I think it would rest you to lie on your back,’ said he. ‘That’s right,’ he added, as she swung herself over. ‘Now.’ He fumbled in a pocket for a piece of string and found it. It was part of the fastening of the hamper which he recollected putting in his pocket. Then he tied this (while he trod water) to the collar of her bodice, and, taking the string in his mouth, he kicked off again with the girl in tow. She was not too weary to help him by keeping in the most favourable position or even by an occasional stroke of her own, and together, united by the string and a good deal more than the string, they slowly drew in to the shore.

By this time a longshore boat had been launched and was coming quickly towards them. The other boats, advancing from the Trawlhaven beach to the nor’ard, were still at some distance when the south beach boat swirled its bows close to Cradock’s head.

He was now at the last point of exhaustion or he would have seen the boat coming. He was doggedly plugging on, his teeth clenched on the string, his left hand ever and again lifting Fanny higher out of the water. Indeed, when old Sam Chapman caught hold of his collar, Fanny's head was higher out of the sea than was Cradock's. But the girl was almost unconscious. The strain and the long contact with the water had proved too much for her lean frame. There was no fat, no 'adipose tissue' to keep the warmth in her. She had closed her eyes, with a last lingering sense of comfort at the proximity of Cradock, at the occasional touch of his hand.

'Hare ye be,' said old Sam, as he caught hold of Fanny as soon as he had relaxed his grip of Cradock's coat, and permitted his son Joe to hold it. 'Laadies allust come fust. Up we come my bewty. Ohrist! I rackon she ha' got some guts in her, bless har pratty eyes. Wha, lor blaame my ole heart alive, tha'ss the gal Butler, h'ist her in!'

Faint and semi-conscious as she was she clung to Cradock as she felt that she was being torn from him. 'No, no,' she managed to gasp out; 'take him, take him.'

'Lor, we're a gooin' tew,' said old Sam, with a chuckle. 'Doan't yew worrit yarself about that. But tha'ss allust laadies come fust wi' me. Oh-ho-oh! Oh-ho-oh!' he cried, as he heaved her streaming body into

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the longshore herring-boat. 'Now then for the maan. I rackon he ha' gart his bellyful o' salt water, which I niver could abide, pore daavil. Up she come. Oh-ho-oh.'

Cradock came spluttering over the gunwales, while the herring-boat rocked and rolled joyously.

'Be theer any moor on 'em afloot?' asked Sam. 'Wha yis. Shorelie I can see tew or t'ree moor on 'em a-flootin' about like a cork b'y. Tha'ss right, bor,' he said to Cradock, who was relieving his stomach of some of the surplus salt water. 'Git yew rid on it an' yew 'll fare as right as ninepence. Off we goo, Joo, boy.'

But before the old fellow could get out to the spot where Nellie and Ralph floated in their lifebelts, and old Billy, now wondrously sober, reclined on his variety of supports, one of the boats from the Trawl-haven rescue lot reached the three and hoisted them aboard. 'Ha'e yew gart the lot?' yelled Sam.

'Ah!' came bellowed over the sea, faint and indistinct against the wind. 'Be yar tew alive an' kickin'?'

'They 'll fare all right arter a drop o' hot rum,' cried old Sam; and as his voice went down wind those in the other boat heard him distinctly, and laughed. 'Tha'ss just what I could dew with,' said Billyboy. 'Christ, I hain't swallered sa much water, salt or fresh, this twanty yare.'

'Had yew yar sheet fast agin, yew ole warmin'?'

asked one of the men in the boat which had picked up Billy and his two companions. 'That sarve yew right. Yew didn't niver ote ta be allowed ta taake out wisitors a' belayin' yar sheets.'

Billy paid no attention to the man, but he hailed the other boat from Trawlhaven which was approaching. 'Take a hitch round har mast, bor,' said he; 'she'll tow ashoor, an' I'll paay foor't. Tha'ss lucky as she didn't sink like a stoon.'

The two boats pulled inshore, and soon the whole of the shipwrecked party stood on dry land. Cabs had been sent for and were waiting at the nearest point they could reach. In less than ten minutes after the landing Cradock and Ralph were driving in one 'fly,' and Nellie and Fanny in another, to their respective homes. Little had been said at the leaving; but the thoughts of more than one of the party were deep and complex. They would all (with the possible exception of old Billy) meet on the morrow.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SUBJUGATION OF UNCLE ROBERT

NEITHER of the brothers felt equal to conversation till they had had a hot drink, a hot bath, and a complete change of clothing. Cradock, being less of a dandy, was the first to go down from his room. He waited in the smoking-room for Ralph. Soon the elder and lesser of the two appeared. He was a little subdued. He could not help realising that he had not shone to advantage as compared with his brother in the adventure of the boat. But he had done his best. He assured himself of that. He had kept up the courage of Nellie Ford, and the result of his action had been that no one had been lost. 'Crad, old man,' he said, grasping his brother by the hand, 'I shall never be able to thank you. But for you I should have lost Fanny. Thanks, old man, a thousand times. If ever I can do anything for you, you will let me know. Promise you will.'

Cradock wrung his brother's hand in answer. He felt that it was hard enough to have saved her for another man without having it 'rubbed in.' He must

make up his mind to grin and bear it. It was settled, anyhow.

'I say, old chap,' said Cradock, 'the whole thing's sure to be in the local paper to-morrow, and it'll be wired up to town. Hadn't you better write to uncle to-night and tell him you're engaged? He'll wonder what the devil is up if he doesn't hear something from you.'

'I suppose I'd better,' said Ralph doubtfully.

'Good God, man,' cried Cradock, 'you don't mean to say that you want any hole-and-corner business about it, surely?'

'No, no, of course not,' said Ralph; 'but you see I haven't applied to the girl's people for their consent yet. Don't you think I ought to see her father or her mother or somebody before I write to uncle?'

'Not a bit of it,' cried Cradock; 'the one thing that the upset of to-day has done is to make it absolutely essential that your engagement should be put on a proper footing at once.'

Poor Cradock wanted to put all temptation away from him. He thought that when once Fanny was the recognised betrothed of his brother, he would be able to kill the passion which had sprung up suddenly, unexpectedly, and most unhappily in his heart.

So Ralph grunted an assent which was rather sullen for a happy lover.

On the following morning, before he had gone up to

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keep the appointment which he had made with Fanny at Ness Lodge, he received a wire from Robert Bear: 'Due Trawlhaven, six thirty-eight to-night.'

'Now the fat's in the fire,' said Ralph. 'Look here, Crad, there'll be the very devil of a row.'

'Well, if there is,' said Cradock, 'you've done the only possible thing you could do. Go up and tell her that uncle is coming down to-night. She'll think of some way to get round him, I know.'

Ralph grunted. Cradock seemed to know a deuce of a lot of what Fanny would do and could do. He seemed inclined to take a little too much upon himself, did Master Cradock. True, he had saved Fanny's life, unless the girl had exaggerated the grandeur of his services when she came to herself ashore. But he must not presume upon that too far. He had chanced to be the finest swimmer of the party, that was all—a mere bit of luck.

It happened that the night of Bear's arrival was the night fixed for the dinner with William Ford. As soon as Fanny and Nellie heard the news, Nellie rang up her husband on the 'phone, and told him that Ralph had written his uncle that he was engaged to Fanny, and that Bear was coming down that night. 'Right oh,' said Florance over the wire. 'I'll see the governor at once. Hold on. Don't ring off.'

Presently the bell rang again. 'The governor's delighted,' said Florance. 'Ask D'Esterre to bring his

uncle up to dinner. I'll send Titchener with the car to bring 'em up. Car at the hotel seven-fifteen. That do?'

Ralph wondered why he did not feel overjoyed in that every obstacle to his engagement seemed likely to melt away. He knew that to take Bear up to old Ford's to dinner was the way of all others to obtain his consent to the match. Bear had a great respect for the Fords, and if he were confronted with the girl at the senior partner's very house, he would not be likely to prove hard of persuasion.

So it was settled, and then Nellie, with the tact that comes from sympathy and brotherhood or sisterhood in adventure, left the two lovers together.

'What's all this?' asked Bear as soon as ever he set foot on the dingy platform of the terminus station which adorns Trawlhaven. 'A boy like you engaged? Pooh! pooh! The girl's people have got too much sense to permit it.'

'I know it's rather hurried, uncle,' drawled Ralph. 'But you see being capsized in a boat acted as an accelerator, don't you know. And really she's a charming girl, and of course she's very well connected.'

'Of course the Fords are good people,' grunted Bear. 'They do a large business with us, and I shouldn't mind if it were larger. William Ford has got the best palate for Provence and Lucca oil that I ever met with, except my own. Very good people and a very

good business. But surely they don't consent to the match? What do they think you are going to live on? On me, sir? Hay?'

Bear's voice was penetrating and resonant though he did not shout. Ralph looked round a little nervously. 'Well, uncle,' said he, 'suppose we wait till we get to the hotel before we discuss it. By the way, Mr. Ford, the senior partner, hopes you will dine with him to-night at seven-thirty. Cradock and I were already engaged when I got your wire, and I went up to apologise to him and put him off. But he wouldn't hear of it. He begged me to try to persuade you to come with us. I'm sure he'll be very hurt if you don't come. He's sending his motor for us, and he could not show you more attention if he tried.'

Robert Bear gave the short barking rumble which represented his chuckle. 'And I suppose I am to meet the lady there,' said he. 'Well, that certainly looks as if Ford has no objection. But I'll say nothing yet. Yes; I shall be pleased to dine with Mr. Ford. Can you tell me if Miss Butler will be there? Hay?'

'I should not be surprised if she were,' said Ralph. 'But really, uncle, I'm sure you'll like her, don't you know.'

'I wish you'd break yourself off that silly habit of saying "don't you know,"' grunted Bear. 'If I did know, I should not have troubled to come down here. Well, your aunt has made me promise not to be too

hard with you, so I'll say no more till I've seen this wonderful young woman. No; don't thank me yet. Very likely I shan't like her; and if I don't, you may marry her if you like, but you'll never get another penny from me. Mind that. If her people like to set you up with enough to live on, that's their lookout.'

Ralph knew that the game was practically won. If his uncle once accepted old Ford's hospitality, he could not cut off his nephew without a penny because he married a girl connected with the Fords. It would be an affront to a fellow commercial man which Bear would never hazard. He knew how much harm an injudicious word or act may do to any business, and Bear's business was as much to him as his children—possibly, as events turned out, it was more.

'What's all this, Crad?' the uncle asked Cradock when Ralph had left the two together. Cradock had been well instructed by his brother as to what he was to say if Uncle Robert tried to pump him, and what with his love and his loyalty he was getting a bit sick of the whole thing. Why should it fall to him to smooth the way for Ralph's marriage? But if the young fellow was a fool (and I think both the D'Esterres must have been foolish), he was at all events a gentleman.

'You mean about Miss Butler, uncle,' said he. 'Well, I think Ralph is lucky to have won her. I don't

know what you will think of her. But, no humbug, I think she's really a charming girl.'

He could have bitten his tongue out as he spoke. But that would not have been likely to advance matters in any way. So he tried to laugh at himself and the situation impartially, and the result was that Robert Bear said: 'You don't look well, boy. I expect you've not got over this affair of yesterday Ralph wrote about. Well, well, I'm proud of you. You were always a gallant lad.'

Robert Bear gave an impression of greater bulk than he possessed. He was something like one of those squat ironclads, ugly but majestic, and his walk (with its stealthy momentum) always reminded me of that silent sliding motion of a 15,000-ton battleship hurtling along at fifteen knots an hour without any sign of effort. When the man spoke he seldom raised his voice. But that resonant muffled tone, vibrant with repressed passion, was far more impressive than any wild hallaballoo could be.

The car, a beautiful ten h.p. Panhard touring-car, arrived at the Dominion at the appointed time. Already the marvellous air of Trawlhaven had had its effect on Bear. He felt brighter, more disposed to lenience, than when he had left stuffy London. With the sole exception of Crabbingby (once the finest seaside village in Daneshire, but now utterly spoilt by the idiots who try to make a combination of Pall Mall and

St. Andrews out of it), Trawlhaven and its cliffs to the south and north afford the most superb health-resort in England. Indeed it is hardly fair to except Crabbingby, for the water and sanitary system of Trawlhaven are the better. However, I am not writing an advertisement for the town, but merely endeavouring to explain that the tonic qualities of its atmosphere were not without their value in developing the events of the career of our woman of character.

William Ford's house had once been an old county hall, and stood in thirty acres of park and wood, leading down to the creek from the harbour, with rights of foreshore and other manorial privileges mostly forgotten. Ford had had the sense not to rely upon his own judgment for the renovation and decoration of the old building, and the result had been that most of the archaic beauties were preserved, though all modern conveniences were added. The electric lights had been fitted to old sconces, the necessary structural alterations had been superintended by old Tom Butler, who loved old Daneshire too well to permit any antiquarian beauty to be destroyed if he could help it.

Robert Bear felt, as he drove up to the main entrance, that this was something more than he had at The Oaks. The Oaks might be, and was, more redolent of wealth. But the antiquity of Daneshire can only be bought on rare occasions, and Ford had

been fortunate indeed. It was with a genuine appreciation of the house and the manner of its adornment that the London magnate reciprocated the genial welcome of the provincial herring-packer. Up to that evening they had only met face to face twice, once at a Salters' dinner, and the other time at the last Paris Exhibition, when Bear, on the jury, had awarded Ford (or rather had supported his claims with the other jurymen) a gold medal for the excellence of his herring in shrimp-sauce and his sprats in oil. Ford had heard to whom he chiefly owed his honour, and had renewed his acquaintance with the man to whom, in the season, he sent thousands of cases of goods every week.

'I'm delighted to see ye, Mr. Bear,' said Ford. 'Come in. Come in, and bring in those boys. Ha! ha! You've heard what a nice game there was yesterday, haven't ye?'

Old Mrs. Ford was a quiet, shy, reserved woman with most gentle manners and the hesitancy of self-distrust. She remembered when she used to cook for her husband, and looked back upon that time with regret. She still superintended the preparation of his favourite dishes, and had lost fourteen cooks in five years through her inability to break off this habit. 'I'm very pleased you've come,' said she, shaking a little with nervousness. 'My daughter-in-law is so worried about how you'll take your nephew's engagement.'

Dear lady! She always said the wrong thing at the wrong time. And yet, as she used to claim triumphantly, very often her unhappy sentences did more good than the most elaborate finesse could have done.

It happened so at her first meeting with Robert Bear. The great subject, which no one had meant to name until after dinner, had suddenly been brought to the front. Bear could not ignore the fact of the engagement, and he could not at once dismiss it as impossible. Despite his lack of finish in manner, the man had sufficient self-respect to be reluctant to show gross rudeness to a lady whom he had just met for the first time, and beneath her own roof. And to declare that the sister of Mr. and Mrs. Ford's daughter-in-law was entirely out of the question as a match for his nephew would be a gross rudeness.

'Well, well, my dear lady,' said he, smiling a little wryly behind his screen of hair, 'we need not discuss that now. Need we? May I not say instead, how delightful I think this old-world house of yours? I've got nothing like it, I assure you—nothing at all like it.'

It was characteristic of Bear to gauge the value of other folks' possessions by his own lack of similar property. It never occurred to him that his declaration that he 'had nothing like it' resembled the voice of patronage in its most offensive form—that it was

as though he had said : ' How extremely lucky you must be. Why, I, who am a far greater man in the world, far richer, far more eminent in the commercial world, have nothing like it.' Fortunately, old Ford's hide was thick, and his wife was always so extremely self-apologetic that she was ready at any time to submit herself to be used, metaphorically, as a door-mat by any one sufficiently coarse in fibre to be blind to her many excellences.

Ford drew himself up and pulled his waistcoat down. ' You should see my vineries and chrysanthemum houses,' said he.

' I should like to do so,' replied Bear, who also prided himself on his chrysanthemums.

' But come in, come in,' cried Ford. ' The young 'uns have sought congenial society a'ready. Ha! ha! ha! Come in, sir, and have a look at the girl!'

' O William,' murmured Mrs. Ford, ' don't speak of Fanny as if she were up for sale.' She laid her hand timidly on Bear's arm. ' I *do* hope,' said she, ' that you will find it in your heart to let the young people have their way. I always think it is so sweet when a boy and girl really love one another. Of course, poor Fanny has got no money. Neither had my husband and I when we married. But we've been happy enough. Haven't we, dear?'

She appealed to William very prettily. It was a thing no woman in society would have had the courage

to do—a thing which a London woman would have thought indecent. But although Ford had fought his way to wealth in business and to the leading position in the excellent parochial community of Trawlhaven, he was still provincial at heart, and he rather liked to see his wife in her Joan mood to his Darby.

He tilted his head a little further back than his wont, and stepped aside so that his wife might lead their principal guest to the drawing-room.

There Florance and Nellie, Ralph, Cradock, and Fanny, rose and fluttered at the entrance of the seniors like a brood of young chickens disturbed by something which terrified them.

The introductions were effected. Bear nodded curtly, rudely (he did not mean to be rude—he could not help it), to Fanny, and his eyes watched her keenly. A puzzled look passed over his face. Where had he seen her before? He did not recognise this girl, quietly and tastefully dressed in the same simple black frock which she had worn at Florance's dinner, as the woman whom he had seen talking with his nephews on the pier on the night of the regatta. Yet his first impression of her was disagreeable. His first instinct was to break off the engagement at any price.

He had hardly had time to exchange two words with any of the people in the drawing-room when dinner was announced. This was a much more formidable function than the happy-go-lucky meal at

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Florance's. Old Ford was proud of his hospitality, and supported its magnificence by the aid of a butler and a footman. The ceremonial of his dinner-table was on a scale of greater elaboration than that which obtained at Bear's own house, The Oaks. He was impressed by it. Certainly Miss Butler could claim to have respectable connections.

It had been arranged that Fanny should sit on the right of Bear, he, of course, having his hostess on his left. The girl had made up her mind to win 'Uncle Robert's' favour. And she knew that her plan of campaign would have to be different from that which she had adopted for the subjugation of the nephew—or nephews.

And yet it is probable that she conquered by the same means. However clever a woman may be, however skilled in the art of matrimonial venery (if a husband may be likened to a stag), it is her personal charm in nine cases out of ten which gives her her influence with men. I do not mean the mere perfection of feature, or even the mere glamour of lovely eyes, the allurements of piquant nose or mouth, or of dainty dimpling flesh, but that indescribable magnetism which radiates Hertzian waves of passion, the more dangerous in that, like other Hertzian waves, they cannot be regulated so as to act on one receiver only. This eerie charm was Fanny's in a very peculiar degree. Ralph, despite his *blasé* weariness of feminine

admiration, had felt his own selfish longing leap to life at the call of the woman's fascination, and had been so carried out of himself that he thought of her before he thought of himself when he found that there was danger of her reputation suffering at the hands of the Jew slop-seller and fish salesman. There were moments still when he wondered at himself, marvelled that he, the hero of a hundred tea-tables, of scores of soft-carpeted stairways at dances, of innumerable flirtations, from all of which he had emerged scot-free, that he should be caught and bound by a provincial girl whom he had casually accosted on the Trawhaven pier in the midst of a crowd of shop-walkers and typists, of milliners' assistants and stock-brokers' clerks! Yet even in her absence her charm held him in thrall. He might wonder at himself, he might protest silently that he didn't know what the devil had come over him, but he never got so far in revolt as to meditate a bid for freedom.

As for Cradock, his infatuation had been simpler, as he himself was simpler. He was more athletic, more manly, and less complex than his brother—the dreamy-eyed lady's-man. He had no superfluity of brains, but he had a good foundation of honour—a useful adjunct for a man who wishes to respect himself, though apt to be an unprofitable asset. He had fallen in her toils willy-nilly, and I think the sweetest moments of his life had been those dramatic minutes

while he was shielding her from the imminent death of the sea.

Of course Fanny knew that Cradock loved her, and, to speak truth, she sometimes wished she had not been in such a hurry to clinch matters with Ralph. Still, Ralph was the elder brother, and probably better off than Cradock. Any way, her game was to propitiate Uncle Robert.

She leaned towards him. He looked at her a little startled. For the life of him he could not understand the queer sensation which assailed him, which made him feel warmer on the right side than the left.

'I'm afraid you disapprove of me dreadfully, Mr. Bear,' Fanny whispered.

Florance had started a lively story, and was purposely keeping the attention of the others fixed on himself. Nellie was making eyes at Cradock. He was trying to think he liked the way things were going. Old Ford and his good wife were seconding the attempts of their son to distract notice from Fanny and Uncle Robert.

Bear's thick lips quivered. He felt constrained to turn his spectacles upon his right-hand neighbour. His head was wide, and the glasses looked strangely far apart. There was a gleam of power in his dark eyes. The depth and sombreness of that gleam showed strong and vivid against the ruddy glory of his beard, whiskers, and moustache.

He felt angry with the girl for forcing his hand. It was no time, over the dinner-table, to talk of such delicate matters as her engagement with his nephew. He would have liked to crush her with that brusque, rough discourtesy which he showed every one who sought him in his office who was not in a position to resent his boorishness. But somehow he found himself unable to be himself. His voice was not only subdued, but abnormally musical, when he answered her. She had kept her great eyes fixed on his face all the while he was deliberating over his answer to her daring words.

‘No, no,’ he said; ‘but I don’t know you, you see.’

‘Then at least be fair,’ said Fanny, with the light of battle in her eyes, ‘and do not condemn me till you *do* know me.’

He couldn’t make it out. What charm was over him that he could not tell her simply then and there that a match between her and Ralph was out of the question, that it would be hunger marrying thirst, that Ralph had to make his way in the world, and that a poor wife could only handicap his chances in life? Where were all the unanswerable arguments he had prepared with which to pulverise this adventuress? Somehow, despite himself, she was winning his sympathy. He began to see the marriage as a possibility.

And of course Fanny knew that as soon as he did,

or sooner. She thanked her stars that Aunt Lavinia had not come down. She had heard a good lot of that estimable woman from both Ralph and Cradock, and she knew that she would never be able to throw dust in her eyes, as she could in the eyes of any silly male thing.

‘I’m always fair,’ grunted Bear. ‘But you see, Miss Butler, that my wife is anxious about her nephew. He has his way to make in the world. It is a dangerous thing for a young man to marry too early.’

‘Oh!’ cried Fanny, clasping her hands very prettily, and turning wide eager eyes to the gleam that shone through those glasses which twinkled at her, ‘I would not harm him for the world. You see, Mr. Bear, we have been very close to death together. Had it not been for your nephew Cradock, I should not be sitting here beside you now. And he saved me, he saved me for his brother’s sake, and because he is a brave fellow.’

‘Dear me!’ muttered the Unitarian to himself; ‘does she want to marry Ralph, or Cradock?’

‘Yes, yes,’ he said aloud to her; ‘Crad was always a gallant lad. But it is Ralph who will have to fight his way in the world with you beside him, and you know Ralph is not very energetic.’

‘Ah,’ said Fanny pleadingly, ‘but he will be. You did not see him when our boat filled and sank. He

wanted to give up his lifebelt to me, although he could not swim and I could. If anything, he was the bravest of all of us. He would have gone to his death willingly for my sake. O Mr. Bear, don't you think that if— if he loves me he would have something to urge him to work if I were his wife? Oh, don't let me do him harm; I'd rather never see him again than injure him. Tell me—tell me you don't think it will harm him to marry me.'

Now Robert Bear, as yet, knew nothing whatever of the parentage of this girl, and little enough concerning her at all. It was clearly his course to be reserved and silent with her. Ordinarily he was a singularly reserved and silent man, his mouth rarely opening for speech unless he had an affront or a boorishness to vent. Now, at the very time when his silence, or even his boorishness, would have been of the greatest service to him, he became almost garrulous, and he could not help it.

'No, no, no,' said he; 'I'm sure association with a girl like you could not harm him. It isn't that at all. Where have I seen you before?' he asked suddenly and bluntly.

Fanny remembered catching a glimpse of him that first night on the pier, but she was far too prudent to say so.

'I'm sure that I've never had the pleasure of meeting you before,' said she. 'You've too strongly

marked a personality to be easily forgotten, and I have an excellent memory. No, Mr. Bear, I'm sure I've never met you before.'

His trend of thought had changed before she finished her answer.

'I don't know what I can say to my wife,' he said under his breath. 'I don't know if she would approve or not.'

Just then William Ford's voice broke in on the duologue of Bear and Fanny. It was raised to an excitable pitch, and the local magnate was evidently very earnest.

'I won't do it, Florance,' said he. 'The sect is nothing better than a sect of Sadducees. I'll never sell a rod of my land to a body of religious cranks like the Unitarians.'

Ralph and Cradock gave a little gasp apiece. Fanny, who knew of Bear's creed, turned gracefully to Ford, and seemed to be listening for more to come from his lips. Bear himself watched the girl through half-closed lids. There was a sombre glow in the black depths of his eyes. He paid no attention to the attack on Unitarians. He never picked up a challenge of the sort till he was sure of victory. He waited to see if the subject would develop.

'I can't see for the life of me,' said Florance, 'why you shouldn't take their money as well as the money of any one else. They offer you a capital price for

the site. They are Nonconformists, it is true; but then you are not a member of the Church of England.'

'No,' said old Ford, 'thank God I am not; and I wish I had never sent you to a school where they destroyed the home teaching you had. But as for these Unitarians, they disbelieve in the divinity of Jesus. They say He was only a human son of God. They don't believe in the Trinity, in the triple God-head, in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.'

Fanny was recognised by her own family and the Fords as possessed of more brains than the common herd. It created no surprise that she should dash into the discussion with her usual courage.

'And they don't believe in Hell, nor in damnation for believing common-sense, dad,' said she. (Both she and Nellie called old Ford 'dad,' and he liked it.) 'For my part, I think they are the most sensible and reasonable people of any. They don't call any one bad names who does not agree with them.'

'O Fanny!' cried Mrs. Ford, trembling; 'how can you talk like that?'

'But it's sense,' said Fanny. 'I was looking them up in the encyclopædia the other day, and I think you'll be awfully narrow-minded, dad, if you refuse to sell them a bit of land for a church because you don't agree with them in everything.'

'My dear Fanny,' said old Ford pompously, 'you

don't understand. Really, what the young people of this age are coming to I am afraid to surmise! Besides it will be a chapel.'

Fanny was about to hold forth on the merits of Unitarianism (to which she had given her attention since Ralph told her of his uncle's creed), when Nellie cried: 'Oh, don't let's talk religion. It's worse than politics, and makes people crosser.'

And Fanny had said what she wanted, and showed Uncle Robert that she was sympathetic with his beliefs. So she said no more.

Robert Bear found that he warmed to this girl more and more. He began to talk to her as though they were old friends. Before the ladies retired to the drawing-room, Fanny knew that she had changed his prejudice against her to friendship. Later in the evening she manœuvred to get him to herself, and completed his conquest. He had all but consented to bless her union with Ralph when the time came for the Panhard to drive the uncle and nephews back to their hotel.

'Whatever made you go on so about Unitarianism, Fanny?' asked the elder Mrs. Ford when the three strangers in the blood had gone.

Nellie burst out laughing. 'Why, don't you know, ma?' she said. 'Mr. Bear is a Unitarian.'

'The deuce he is!' cried old Ford. 'I hope I haven't offended him. His firm is worth a clear thousand a

year to us. I wouldn't have mentioned the confounded thing if I'd known.'

'Oh, it's all right, governor,' said Florance, with a grin; 'our Fanny worked it very cleverly. Your little outburst enabled her to score a point. I think you may take it as settled that the marriage will go through.'

'Anyway, I meant what I said,' said Fanny impatiently. 'I think it's all nonsense pretending that one set of beliefs must be right and another wrong. I don't believe any one knows anything.'

'I believe one thing, Miss Fanny,' said Florance. 'That is, that you know your way about extremely well.'

'It's just as well,' said Fanny. 'Now, if I can keep the boarding-house dark, or get nunky to swallow it, I flatter myself I shan't have done so badly.'

Ralph saw the change in his uncle's attitude before the car drew up at the hotel. Yet he was not altogether happy. Fanny had shown herself in a new light. She was awfully clever. There was no doubt about that. But how sincere was she?

'I won't say much to-night, Ralph,' said the uncle, when he bade his nephews good-night. 'But I will say that I am agreeably surprised with Miss Butler. I think she has a great deal of charm—a great deal. It's a pity she has not some money. But we shall see, we shall see.'

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And Ralph and Cradock knew that this was practically tantamount to accepting the girl as Ralph's future wife, and also to a promise that Bear would do something tangible and definite to giving the young couple a start in life.

The next day Tom Butler and his wife met Robert Bear at Florance's house, and before the uncle returned to town he had promised that Lavinia should write to Fanny, with an invitation to her to pay a visit to The Oaks. Fanny's performance on the Broadwood grand had completed his fascination. He was no judge of music, but he thought she must be a fine pianist by the noise she made. One thing continued to puzzle him. 'I wonder,' said he to himself, as the train whirled him south, 'where I've seen her before?'

CHAPTER IX

LAST DAYS AT TRAWLHAVEN

FANNY'S visit to The Oaks was supposed to be something in the nature of a trial gallop. Though Robert Bear had gone much further than he intended towards formally accepting her as the future wife of his nephew, he had restrained himself from giving any actual promise that he would countenance the marriage or subscribe towards the establishment of the couple; and without his help it was certain that no marriage could take place. He had maintained (so reasonably that it was impossible to confute him) that the mutual acquaintance of the lovers had been so short that they could not possibly know enough of each other to be sure that each was choosing for the best. The visit to The Oaks would not only enable Lavinia to exercise her judgment as to the girl and to express her opinion, but would help the pair to become better acquainted. Fanny had thought it advisable to hint that Bear should not be taken into the secret of the extreme brevity of Ralph's acquaintance with the Fords. The real duration of her own intimacy (for there had been

a certain amount of intimacy from the first) with the man she only confided to Nellie and Florance. The old Fords thought that it had been a real case of love at first sight, and Mrs. Ford delighted in the romance in her simple, early Victorian way.

Lavinia proved less tractable than was her wont. 'Really, Bub,' she said, in her deep, vibrant contralto, 'I think I ought to see the girl before giving her an invitation to stay with me. I think you've shown me a little less than your usual consideration in promising her that I should invite her before ever I have set my eyes on her.'

'Oh, nonsense,' said Robert; 'Ralph is mad about her, and nothing will make him happy but to marry her. I thought you'd like to make the young fool happy, and I did the best I could. Of course if you don't like it you can write to him and decline to have her here. I'm sure I am not anxious for her to come. Ha! ha!'

Lavinia looked at her husband keenly. There was something strange about him. If she had not thought that she knew him to be above doing or thinking anything in any way undesirable, she would have fancied that he was ashamed of himself for some reason or other. But the man's manner and habits, rude and uncivil as they were, were so pre-eminently respectable, so profoundly moral, and so precisely conventional in form, that the idea of any irregularity of either deed,

word, or thought never occurred to her. Nor did it occur to Robert. He felt some strange influence at work within him, and was quite unable to define or classify it. Perhaps the strong sea-air of Trawlhaven had acted a little too vigorously on his liver. A blue pill would soon put that right. In the meantime, what the dickens did Lavinia mean by making difficulties about asking the girl? She was usually only too ready to fill the house with a parcel of idiotic girls; and Fanny was not idiotic. Whatever he thought of her, he could not call her that.

‘You know, Bub, that I must ask her now,’ said Lavinia; ‘but I wish I’d seen her before he had engaged himself.’

‘Oh, you needn’t pay any attention to that,’ said Robert, with a sneer. ‘If I don’t help ’em they can’t get married, so the engagement will go for nothing. He’s your nephew, and I shan’t put my hand in my pocket to please myself. If you don’t want him to marry the girl, you can stop it easily enough.’

‘You know it’s not that, Bub,’ said Lavinia. ‘If he has pledged himself he must keep his word. Well, I suppose I’d better write and ask her to come as soon as the boys come back from Trawlhaven. Cyrus will be in Chicago, George in Norfolk, and Edward in Switzerland, so Ralph and Cradock may as well come and stay here too.’

The Bear boys did not regard their cousins with any

extreme enthusiasm. Lavinia began to see the hand of Providence in the fact that all three would be away at the psychological time. It did something towards reconciling her to sending the invitation.

During the remainder of the stay of the two D'Esterres at Trawlhaven, they naturally saw a good deal of Fanny and the Fords. They became very friendly with Florance, and silly Nellie brought her husband's chaff on herself by her obvious attempts to flirt with Cradock. But Florance knew that she was perfectly trustworthy in her tinsel passions. She might go so far as a squeezed hand, but would never attain to the indiscretion of a kiss. The futility of her imaginary amours was rather boring, especially as he knew how to play the game so much more practically and enjoyably himself. But as he was the last man to permit his wife that liberty of love-making which he permitted himself, her real innocence was a reason for permitting her to go about with Fanny and the two D'Esterres as freely as if she were an old woman.

The disclosure of the means of livelihood of Mrs. Butler at the Pontine Boarding Establishment had somewhat cooled off Ralph's enthusiastic admiration for the girl. He had always been somewhat of a lazy lover, though when he did take the trouble to flirt he did it very nicely. He was, too, a bit of a snob, and the boarding-house stuck in his gullet like any fish-bone

from a Trawlhaven bloater. He thought that he had been unfairly treated. He ought to have been told about the boarding-house before he had been accepted. He forgot that he had for once been passionate in his pleading, and that the girl's charm had carried him out of his usual nonchalance, so that he had wooed her gallantly and eagerly. Moreover, although he was a 'lady's-man,' there was little of the real hunger of passion about him—there rarely is any real passion about the tame cats of the afternoon tea-tables. He had been fascinated by Fanny, had exerted himself to salve his vanity by obtaining a confession of love from her. Now that he had heard her admit that she loved him, his heart's ambition was almost satisfied. He experienced none of that physical yearning with which richer blooded lovers are acquainted. His vanity had been appeased. And he had learned that the girl about whom he had excited himself was only a boarding-house keeper's daughter. True, she was connected through her sister with the Fords; true, her father was an artist, once famous, and of decent Dane-shire family. But now the fact that he had made her acquaintance irregularly began to annoy him. He lost a certain amount of respect for her—and he had nothing to gain from any such loss of respect as some young men might have had. But he did not go so far yet as actually to regret his engagement. The charm which had first attracted him still exercised its spell

whenever he was in her presence and whenever she chose to put forth her might. But the course of his wooing became a little commonplace, less romantic. 'Dooce take it,' he said to himself one day, 'I'm getting provincial myself.'

Cradock had attempted to forget the love for Fanny, which had shamed him to his soul, in carrying on the intrigue with the girl from Whiteley's to a successful issue. But the girl, dainty and pretty as the little minx was, had more pleasure in the game of love than had poor Cradock. And the sense of self-abhorrence, of self-disgust, which came upon him after he had spent an amorous hour or two with pretty Letty Williams (as the lady from the blouse department in Westbourne Grove called herself) made him rejoice when the poor shopgirl's brief holiday was over, and she went off in tears and a first-class carriage (for he had changed her ticket for her, thinking that at least he might make her comfortable in her return to work even if he did not love her). Nellie did her best to console him, though she did not know that he was in need of consolation. But Cradock was more of a man, man the animal, than was Ralph. And the silly, aimless flirtations which satisfied the cold blood of Nellie Ford only bored him by their extreme stupidity. To make him the more dissatisfied with the fall of circumstance, he saw that Ralph was not the enterprising lover he had been. It seemed hard to Cradock that his beauty-

man of a brother should win the prize he, Cradock, longed for, and then should get so little enjoyment out of his success.

Now and then, on the excursions inland to Mereby Broad, to Mudflats Creek, or Lake Westreach, the *partie carrée* split into different partners, and Ralph made himself agreeable in his finicking way to Nellie Ford (who was willing enough to fall into one of her temporary loves with him or any one), and Cradock found himself with Fanny. Fanny knew every pang of anguish which wrung his heart at any little familiarity which she showed him as Ralph's brother. At least that was what he thought—as Ralph's brother. She knew that the touch of her hand, the feel of a wisp of her hair blown across his face by a gust of wind, brought the blood to his face and a light to his eyes which she had never seen in Ralph. Cruel (as most women are to lovers until they return their love and suffer for themselves), she took delight in experimenting on the boy. She knew exactly how she could make him hold his breath, or gasp, how his pulse would leap, his eyes shine and sparkle when she touched him, or bent towards him, or let her breath fan his cheek. And Cradock did not know that she was watching her experiments with something that became more than amusement.

He was glad when the time came for the two brothers to say good-bye to their Trawlhaven friends.

He hoped that he might be able to beat down this infernal love, even though he was going to stay in the same house with her and Ralph at The Oaks. As for Fanny, she wished both Ralph and Cradock good-bye very prettily. She was to follow them to The Oaks in a fortnight's time. And she was radiant at the thought of it. At last the lists of London were open to her challenge. How would she speed in the joust?

CHAPTER X

FANNY AT THE OAKS

ROBERT BEAR found that his mind dwelt a good deal on the affairs which were being transacted at Trawlhaven. For some reason or other which he did not understand, it was Fanny rather than Ralph who occupied his thoughts, and on whose behalf his solicitude was roused. Bear was no fool, nor was he intentionally other than an upright, honourable gentleman. That his performance was less than his intention was his misfortune, a misfortune common enough among the sons of men. He was so sober in his life, so clean spoken, so strict in the ethical system he professed, so altogether over-righteous according to the opinion of most men with whom he came in contact, that he was revered to such an extent by all, that, with the possible exception of his wife, dear Lavinia, no one was ever comfortable in his presence. It may seem paradoxical to say that a man of boorish manners, of uncouth carriage, and brusque disregard of others was revered. Possibly his wealth and commercial success helped him to that pinnacle of awe which he made his foot-

stool. I admit freely to my readers that I have never been able to solve the riddle of the discrepancy between the man's character as I judged it to be, and that madness of his later years. I have a plain tale to tell, and a true one, and my readers must puzzle out the meaning of it for themselves. Should any one of them come to a certain conclusion, I shall be glad to hear from him or her. Any one may hit on the correct solution. Even I may have done so. But I doubt it.

I am sure of one thing. That Bear neither understood himself nor his conduct.

'A most sensible girl,' he said to himself several times. 'Although I gather that she is not a professed Unitarian, she showed a most intelligent understanding of our position. A pity she has no money! A great pity!'

He was loth to bind himself to furnish an eleemosynary income for Ralph and his wife. Yet he felt that if the marriage went through he could not avoid doing so. 'And why should I rob my children for the sake of a nephew by marriage?' he asked himself. He knew that he was against the marriage, but he knew too that he would be unable to make a stand against Fanny when she came to The Oaks. But if he knew why this was, he disguised it even from himself.

I think that when Fanny left Trawlhaven on her visit to The Oaks she was already dissatisfied with

Ralph as a lover. She remembered those vital minutes when she and Cradock were alone in the Southcliff Roads, alone with the sea and the grinning menace of death. She had never been on the verge of the unknown with Ralph in that way, and somehow since that adventure she had seemed to be knit more closely to Cradock than to the man to whom she was betrothed. She was prepared to admit the reason, the good sense of Ralph's attitude when the *Mary* cutter sank. But she knew that she would have loved Ralph better dead, if he had refused to take the life-belt and been drowned, than she would now ever love him living. Women are often cantankerous in a silly irrational way. But it is not certain that Fanny's mind did not travel in the right direction, though it followed irregular paths. She had sensed a physical cowardice in Ralph, and although she could not deny that by his action everything had ended in the best possible way, she still compared Cradock, who had offered the tiny residue of his exhausted strength to save her, with Ralph, who had cheerily agreed that inasmuch as she could swim and he could not, it would be better for him to preserve his precious life with the belt. It was unfair. She knew it was unfair. But no woman can check or alter her feelings on a basis of fairness.

But nevertheless she was prepared, nay, she intended, to go through with the marriage. She had no inclina-

tion to cause such a scandal as the breach of her engagement for the purpose of marrying the brother of the man whom she jilted would cause. And, at this time, she certainly had no idea of those ulterior developments which changed her from an honest adventuress into a thing it is difficult to define.

Ralph met her at Liverpool Street and accompanied her down the same line to The Oaks. He had avoided seeing his aunt until such time as he should bring his chosen wife with him. Cradock was already at The Oaks, but Ralph had merely sent his luggage down with his brother, and arranged to accompany Fanny on her first visit to that house where her stay was to prove so eventful for her, so vital to her life and to the lives of others.

Ralph, like any another young man about town, did not believe in a public show of amorous relations. But Fanny had been accustomed to the more primitive manners of Trawlhaven. She thought him cold because he did not kiss her on the platform. Why, she had had the greatest difficulty in preventing other young fellows staying at the Pontine boarding establishment from kissing her on the Esplanade! But she found that she had no longing for his kiss. He was a beautiful-featured, languishing-eyed youth. But the influence his physical charms had had upon her had never been so strong since that moral failure of courage on the sinking of the cutter. No, she thought over

and over again, no prudence, no wise forethought for the good of all, could excuse that. He should never have let her swim off with his brother. And when she thought this, she naturally also thought of Cradock's self-devotion at the hour of danger.

She never thought once of Robert Bear, save for one instant when she laughed to herself over her manoeuvre of pretending to be sympathetic with Unitarianism. She was Unitarian, Wesleyan, Evangelical, High Church, Anglo-Catholic, Roman Catholic, Primitive Methodist, Agnostic or Mystic according as her interests required.

But as yet she was comparatively harmless. She had no desire to injure any one, and her ambition had merely reached a stage at which she hoped that she might one day make a figure in London society. She had not yet been tried by the touchstone of feminine spite and mighty possibilities.

Her first impression of The Oaks was extremely gratifying. Although, as Bear had confessed to old Ford, there was none of the charm of antiquity about the ugly squares of freestone, the sham parapets of cement, the great plate-glass windows, there was the atmosphere of that luxurious comfort where money can be spent without regarding the expenditure. The great oblong hall was strewn with rich, soft Eastern rugs. The very hush of the house, the deft-footed men, the silent women who were always on the spot

when they were required but never obtrusively in the way, all gave an impression of that style which money alone can give. I don't mean that this perfection of comfort can be attained by money without any other accessory attributes. But Lavinia had the instinct for comfort, and Bear did not stint her in her very modest demands for house and dairy. The result of the woman's talent and the man's wealth was delicious. For it was the talent, the personality of that sweet-hearted, good woman Lavinia which permeated the house. The wealth was merely an adjunct. Lavinia saw that there was no 'stink' of gold.

Fanny felt a little nervous, for almost the first time in her life, when she met Lavinia. Every woman knows that there is a perspective glass in the eyes of every other woman which can see further into the nature of one of her own sex than any man can do. If Lavinia had been an ordinary woman of the world, selfish, vain, greedy of admiration, empty-headed and unreliable, Fanny would have known better how to win her to her interests. But what was she to do with the tall, slim, delicate-featured woman whose shadow-rimmed eyes were searching, and yet seemed to be searching for good and not for evil? A woman of a different type from Fanny, a woman perfectly at ease with her own conscience, might have welcomed inspection by such charitable orbs of kindness. But as soon as Fanny set eyes on Lavinia, as soon as she

noticed the soft and graceful dignity of her walk, the modest ease of her carriage, the steadfast honesty which radiated from her presence, she felt that she had come upon a stumbling-block in the career she had mapped out for herself. Distrust and unease beget distrust and unease. Fanny's hesitancy when she accepted the calm, even-voiced words of welcome from her hostess was plainly natural, not simulated for the sake of winning sympathy. Lavinia's pure, steady gaze transfixed the little adventuress, and in less than a second of time as the sun measures it, Lavinia had read the nature of the woman who sought her favour, and Fanny had learnt that she could never deceive the noble simplicity which confronted her upon the very threshold of her new life.

Lavinia held out her hand, and there was a pitying look on her face as she did so. She always pitied the unworthy.

Fanny, greatly daring, and determined to take the bull by the horns, held her face to be kissed. 'May I not call you aunt?' she asked prettily, with a fine assumption of pleading timidity.

A very faint smile passed in a breath across Lavinia's mouth. 'I hope that you will do what you wish, my dear,' said she. 'Ralph, you must make Miss Butler understand that I like every one to feel at home here.'

'Yes, aunt,' said Ralph, kissing her, and grinning. 'I know you do. And when uncle's away, I think . . .'

'No, no!' said Lavinia, 'you mustn't hint things like that, Ralph. If people can't get on with your uncle, you ought to know that it is not his fault. You, at least, should bear witness to his kindness.'

'Oh, he's kind enough,' said Ralph lightly; 'but he's rather alarming till you get used to him. Now isn't he? I hope he'll remember that Fanny is a stranger to his moods. He was tame enough at Trawlhaven, wasn't he, Fanny?'

Fanny used every moment to study Lavinia. As yet she had not the slightest idea of coming into conflict with her hostess. But she found that this great nature was a sealed book to her. Giddy, flighty, selfish, vain, and shallow women she understood and could gauge to a nicety; but here she felt she was at a loss.

'I thought he seemed very kind, Ralph,' she said, with downcast eyes. 'I'm sure it is most awfully kind of you and him to have me here,' she added, raising a mendicant glance to Lavinia. Despite her natural courage and self-confidence, Fanny felt a little nervous in her unaccustomed surroundings. There was something about Lavinia, something in the atmosphere of The Oaks, which cowed her.

Lavinia stood so still, so calm, that the very majesty of her unnerved the provincial.

'Would you like to have some tea, or go to your room first?' asked Lavinia.

And Fanny, longing to be alone, so that she might think over her plan of campaign now that she had seen what manner of woman Lavinia was, said, 'Oh, thank you, I feel so dusty and horrid, I should like to go up first, if I may.'

Lavinia noticed that the girl had brought no maid. She rang the bell in the hall, and directed the man who answered it to order the housekeeper to show Miss Butler her room.

As she reached the top of the stairway which led from the hall into the gallery on to which most of the principal bedrooms opened, Cradock came running in from the park at the back. He seemed far more excited over Fanny's arrival than did Ralph, but then the latter had met her at Liverpool Street, and doubtless got over some of his raptures on the way down.

'Well, aunt!' cried Cradock in his frank, boyish way, and throwing one of his arms round Lavinia's neck; 'what do you think of her? Don't you think Ralph is a lucky fellow?'

'My dear boy,' said Lavinia, a little sadly, as she passed her hand fondly over his thick, close-cropped hair, 'I can't say yet. You must give an old woman time to make up her mind, you know. I hope and pray she'll make him happy.'

'Oh, hang it all, Crad!' drawled Ralph; 'for heaven's sake don't rapturise! No one does it now, don't you know.'

'You don't, that's evident,' said Lavinia, smiling. 'Well, Cradock, I dare say he feels deeply even if he doesn't show it. He never was a demonstrative boy, you know.'

'By the Lord, no!' drawled Ralph. 'Well, Aunt Lavvie, I'll go up and dress. Dinner at seven-thirty?'

'Yes, dear,' said Lavinia. 'I'll send some tea up to Miss Butler; I don't suppose she'll come down much before dinner. The young girls of to-day have such a lot of clothes to choose from, and she's sure to wish to look her best the first night.'

'Poor Fanny hasn't got much of a wardrobe,' said Ralph, a little testily; 'but I dare say you are right.'

He strolled lazily upstairs.

'So you really think Ralph is to be congratulated, Crad,' said Lavinia, taking the young fellow's arm and leading him into the great chrysanthemum-house, which opened out of the hall and ran to a door leading into the drawing-room.

'Yes, that I do,' said Cradock stoutly. 'Don't you like her, auntie?'

'I'll tell you in a week's time,' said Lavinia; 'but after all, the main thing is, does he love her and does she love him?'

No one knew better than Cradock that that indeed *was* the point. He was too loyal both to Ralph and to Fanny to place any importance on the little

tantalising freedoms which Fanny had allowed him, had even encouraged and sought. But his love had a fierce struggle with his loyalty. And Ralph's apparent indifference made the struggle harder. Ah! he thought, if he were the acknowledged lover of Fanny, he would show his appreciation of that inestimable privilege in a very different manner. But, he always remembered in time, he was not.

'Oh, I think there's no doubt of that,' he said. 'Old Ralph never did like to make a show of himself; and the girl can't take the lead in spooning.'

'Not with Ralph,' said Lavinia, rather cryptically.

CHAPTER XI

HOME SWEET HOME, WITH VARIATIONS

ROBERT BEAR was in the habit of arriving home barely ten minutes before the dinner-hour. His custom was then to wash his hands and face and brush his hair hurriedly in the lavatory attached to the bathroom of his bedroom suite, shuffle on a dinner-jacket over the waistcoat and other attire which he had worn all day, and go down straight to the dining-room. He would then wander about the room grunting to himself, or to any one who happened to be there for the matter of that, until the first course was served. He then seated himself at his end of the great table, and drummed upon the table-cloth with a knife, fork, or spoon (according to chance), until the members of his party were seated, when he mumbled a brief grace and commenced to eat with a rapidity which was so extraordinary as to be alarming. Lavinia had never known him vary from this routine save on the rare occasions of formal dinner-parties, and she was surprised when he reached The Oaks a good forty minutes before seven-thirty, and proceeded to garb himself in dinner costume. But she said nothing.

She never wore anything but the plainest black dresses, and the height of her splendour was to screen her neck and bosom with black lace instead of black silk or stuff. One old-fashioned pearl and intaglio brooch she wore in the lace, her wedding-ring and one half-hoop keeper (in which the stones were diamonds of exceptional brilliancy), made up the sum-total of the jewellery to be seen upon her.

She found her husband already in the drawing-room, chatting to Fanny, when she went down. It amazed her to see the kindly deference which Bear showed his guest. It was so unlike the man. He smiled, lengthened his usual short barking syllables to reasonable speech, and, on the announcement that dinner was served, offered his arm so gallantly that Ralph was reminded of a performing bruin. He whispered to Lavinia, as he went in with her, 'Uncle seems to like her, doesn't he?'

'So much the better for you, boy,' said Lavinia, who never permitted a word which was disrespectful to her husband to be uttered in her presence without showing her displeasure. 'It would be a poor prospect for your hopes of marrying her if he did not.'

'Hum!' said Ralph, twirling his moustache languidly with the hand which was not on the side of his aunt.

Cradock, in his straightforward innocence, was delighted to see that Fanny had made so good an

impression at Trawlhaven that Bear had not forgotten her, nay, seemed rather eager to distinguish her and do her honour. He had schooled himself to look on the girl as his sister-in-law, and was succeeding,—perhaps not quite so well as he thought; still he was making some progress in his endeavours.

But even Cradock was surprised out of himself when Bear began to chat and smile to Fanny when the courses were served. Never before had the spice-merchant been known to do other than devour his food voraciously, silently, with the eager haste and concentration on the act of feeding of an animal.

‘Yes,’ said Robert Bear, ‘I’ve one of the finest herds of Kerry stock in the three kingdoms.’

Fanny had spoken with rapture of the excellence of the milk and butter and the beauty of the cows which produced the milk, on a model farm at Mereby, six or seven miles from Trawlhaven, and Bear had devoted much of his time and money to the acquisition of the finest Kerry blood to be obtained.

‘Oh!’ said Fanny, looking at her host with her great pleading eyes, with an expression in them as if she thought that he must be a deity to possess a herd of Kerry stock; ‘I should so like to see them!’

‘Of course you shall,’ said Bear. ‘Ralph, don’t forget to take Miss Butler to see the herd and the dairy to-morrow. You’ve nothing else arranged for the morning, have you?’

'No,' said Ralph; 'I thought she'd rather rest here the first morning.'

Throughout the dinner Bear seemed to be another man from the brusque boor who usually sat in his chair at the dinner-table. His eyes actually twinkled behind their gold-framed large circular lenses. Lavinia, according to her wont, spoke but little. But she watched Fanny and Bear closely, and, every now and then, her eyes would turn to Ralph, and there would be an uneasy look in them.

Cradock began to grin. He had never seen his uncle like that before. 'Hang it!' he chuckled to himself, 'uncle's coming out in a new line! I've never seen him flirt before, ho! ho! ho!'

Of course his thoughts and his laughter were silent. They were indeed scarcely more than a grotesque notion. The mere idea of Robert Bear in connection with flirtation was so preposterous that it was enough to make any one laugh.

'Shall we see you again, Bub?' asked Lavinia, as she gave the signal for Fanny to rise with her.

'Oh, yes, Lavinia,' said Bear, quite cheerfully. 'I want to hear some of Miss Butler's music. She's a very fine pianist, isn't she, Ralph?'

'Ye-e-es,' drawled Ralph. 'She'll make you sit up, aunt. She gives a jolly different performance from old Polly Swallow you're so fond of cracking up. She can make the piano do what she likes. Can't she, Crad?'

Cradock, of course, was a whole-hearted admirer of her mechanical dexterity on the keyboard, and said so.

‘Well, don’t be long then, Bub,’ said Lavinia. ‘I’m rather tired to-night.’

Bear answered a little testily: ‘My dear Lavinia, you *always* seem a little tired. What on earth do you do to make yourself so fatigued? I’m sure I don’t know what you have to do.’

‘No, Bub,’ said Lavinia. She knew well enough why it was that she so soon grew tired in these days. She had consulted the most reliable specialist on phthisis, and she knew the scourge was there. With care she was assured that she might live for years, might even throw off the worst symptoms of the disease. But she did not let Robert know that there was anything definite the matter with her. He himself was so brutally strong, and, though his appearance was often demurely sleek, she knew the primitive instincts in him which made him feel a revulsion from delicacy. She had once stood beside him during a rabbit-drive, when the warren had been ferreted and the escapes blocked, and she never forgot the madness of the blood-lust which shone terribly in his reddened eyes as he fired barrel after barrel of his two guns, and sent master Bunny somersaulting over head and heels by the hundred. It had been a revelation to her to see the joy of killing awake to a passion in the man. She had, previously to that, always thought that his

boorishness, his roughness and brusquerie, were artificial or the result of shyness, and that the demure sleekness with which he walked and sometimes spoke, showed the real tender gentleness of his nature. But after that rabbit-drive she knew the brute in the man and feared it. She still loved him. He was the father of her boys, her boys whom she loved with a fervour which is rare even in a mother; she still did her utmost to see to his comfort. But she saw possibilities in the man of which she had never suspected the existence. She had seen his animalism ebulliate in one form. What if other passions, other primitive desires, should rise in him to such a pitch as to whirl him beyond all regard for convention, respectability, duty? She thought that the primæval devil was sufficiently curbed in him by evolution and education (though she would not have known the meaning of the term 'evolution'), but there was always a secret dread at her heart that some day the temper of pre-historic man might break out in him in some more scandalous way than in the blood-lust of a rabbit slaughter.

'Will you play to me now, dear?' she asked Fanny, when coffee had been served and drunk. 'My husband and the boys will be in almost directly now.'

It was characteristic of Lavinia that she did not ask Fanny to afford her a pleasure for her own sake. She was devoted to music, and was herself no mean

musician, though she neither played nor worried an instrument. She had a finer appreciation of the meanings of melodics and harmonics than many a brilliant key-thumper. But to please her, music must be music—not a meaningless roulade of hurried, scampering scales, or the syrupy flavourlessness of a popular 'tune.' It was the soul rather than the fingers which made the performer to Lavinia's taste. And, alas! poor Fanny had no soul.

She could and did pose as a quiet, home-loving girl, with no ambition beyond pleasing those whom she loved. She was an artiste who could assume almost any character on demand. But Lavinia saw the artistry and the effort, and guessed at something of the real woman behind. It was a relief to her to close the conversation by a request for some music.

Fanny did not know how wretched a musician she was to all those who listened with understanding. She believed that the hour had come when she would triumph over the dislike of her hostess, which she had realised and felt as plainly as though it were some concrete thing. She rose and crossed the drawing-room to the beautiful Erard. The piano stood with its keyboard opposite the glass door from the drawing-room into the large chrysanthemum-house. As Fanny threw open the instrument and seated herself on a sturdy, comfortable extent of bench (which one Harold Mortimer, a friend of Lavinia and Cyrus Bear, had

insisted was the proper seat for a piano-player instead of a rickety twizzling stool), she could see the early blooms in the delicious framing of green ferneries, palms, and creepers. It suddenly came upon her that she was a lucky girl. How different was this from that dreadful Pontine boarding establishment! She wondered how her mother was getting on without her. The season at Trawlhaven was not yet quite over. Her mother had grumbled a little at being deprived of her help. But the good boarding-house keeper was too wise in her generation to prevent her daughter from making the most of her chance. And after all, of late years, since Nellie married Florance Ford, and turned Fanny's thoughts to ambitious hopes, the latter had not been of much assistance in the house. Boarders did not like to be snubbed. And Fanny certainly had a sharp way with certain of the younger boarding clerks who tried to take advantage of her position, and to beg for a kiss or a flower. She had not seemed to be so standoffish before Nellie married. Indeed there had been a little trouble with——well, all that was over. Sophia Butler hoped that her younger daughter might bring her pigs to as good a market as had Nellie, and the simple woman would have put it in just those words without the slightest compunction. Fanny thought of all this (for she knew well enough what her mother was saying to old Tom, the artist father), and with a laugh of delight at her escape from

the Chollies, 'Erries, Arties, Reggies, etc. etc. of the Esplanade, she struck into Home Sweet Home with variations by one Herr Blunderstein, *né* Jones—a five-finger acrobatic performance, but as much like music as is a Daneshire tin-pan band.

The melody is commonplace enough, and has become popular principally because only great singers can get anything out of it. When a great artist breathes her soul into the notes they acquire a value entirely misleading; they become subjective notes, part of the artist's personality. Fanny took the 'tune' about *allegretto*. She was eager to get on to the variations and show what she could do.

Presently she was storming about that Erard. Up and down, with fingers intertwined, one hand over the other, hard pedal down, then the soft pedal and a kind of canine whine as the unhappy air was tortured into an unwholesome minor. Crash, crash, crash, and chords resolved discord into concord; crash, crash, crash, and the melody (what there was of it) was somewhere down in the bass one moment and piccoling it at the very top of the piano (*pizzicato*, very light with tricky wrist-work!) the next. Lord, what a waste of time and temper and good piano strings! But it was a 'piece' which had been greatly admired by Fanny's Trawlhaven circle—even Florance had expressed himself amazed by the performance.

Lavinia sat quite still, her eyes wearing a puzzled

look, as if wondering why any one should take such a vast deal of trouble for the sake of making such cacophonous chaos of any poor tune in the world. She was sitting thus, patiently, endeavouring to guess 'where was the music the Dickens,' when the door opened and the men came in, walking on tip-toe as though about some nefarious enterprise. Lavinia had never seen her husband on tip-toe before. It was a comical sight. But she did not smile at it.

Fanny, her head bent over the keys, was occupied in crashing down five-finger chords with her left, while the right performed a prestissimo cadenza to one lengthy variation which took in almost every note on the piano, and seemed to long for fresh fields to conquer. She did not observe the entrance of the male contingent, and, when that cadenza came to its painful end, she swept her hair (now beginning to be a sort of three-quarter-length hair, neither close-cropped nor long enough to 'do up') from her perspiring brow and plunged into the syncopated agony of the next variation.

Robert seated himself beside his wife. Ralph flung himself at length on a couch, Cradock went over to the piano and watched the flying fingers.

'Isn't it wonderful?' asked Robert Bear, looking at Fanny with intense admiration. 'And they tell me she's had very little tuition.'

'Marvellous,' said Lavinia.

The usual runs and reiteration of the common chord of the keynote, foretold the close of the wonderful composition.

'Thanks, so much,' drawled Ralph from his couch.

'By George, Fanny, that *was* ripping!' said Cradock. The good fellow's idea of perfect music was Stephen Adams's songs and erotic valse refrains. Fanny conquered him by sheer brilliance.

'My dear Miss Butler,' said Robert Bear, rising from his seat and leading the girl back to the piano-bench which she had quitted after the last 'bang' of the common chords, 'I'm sure you will not think me importunate if I beg you to afford us the very great pleasure of hearing you play something else. Really, your talent is remarkable. I have never heard an amateur like you.'

'Nor I,' muttered Lavinia under her breath. 'Bub,' she said aloud, 'I shall say good-night. I'm very tired. Good-night, Miss Butler; good-night, boys. I suppose you'll all breakfast with me in the morning?'

'Yes,' said Robert. 'Don't get up to my early meal.'

Bear breakfasted at seven forty-five, and alone, when neither Cyrus nor George was going 'up' with him. He disliked any one to be present at his matutinal gobble save his sons. He fed himself in five minutes, and considered that the time taken up at the table should be devoted solely to eating. Conversation was out of place at the breakfast-table. As soon as he had

swallowed sufficient provender to keep him going till lunch-time, he rushed off to catch a train, which got him to his office at nine. His wealth made no difference in his way of living. He would never have been happy away from the pungent odours of his office and warehouses, and life held no greater joy for him than the sampling of fine nutmegs, cinnamon, or cloves.

Fanny leapt from her seat and ran prettily to her hostess. 'Good-night,' she said; 'but, please, won't you call me Fanny?'

She had not given up all hopes of winning Lavinia's favour. As yet her great hazard had not been born in her imagination. She still had a use for Lavinia and her friendship.

Lavinia looked at her, and there was pity in her eyes—pity for the woman in that she was what she was. 'If you like,' she answered, in her vibrant contralto. 'Good-night then, Funny.' Her peculiarities of pronunciation, which were entirely unintentional, made the girl regret a little that she had been so eager to be called by her Christian name. Fanny is not a name of excessive charm. But Funny was ridiculous, and Fanny never liked to be ridiculous if she knew it.

'But,' she said in reply to Lavinia's 'good-night,' 'had I not better come too? I can't stay up without you very well. Can I?' she whispered into the ear of her hostess.

Lavinia's pity became tinged with contempt. As if Fanny were really so rigid in regarding the proprieties!

'Oh, my dear,' she said, 'surely there can be no harm when your future husband, his brother, and uncle are with you. It is not like a houseful of strangers. Please do not be too particular in this house. We believe in being comfortable. Make yourself at home, or I'm afraid you'll have a dull stay.'

She smiled rather sadly as she left the room. As she closed the door behind her she heard Robert say, 'Now, please Miss Butler, play us something else.' And she heard Fanny reply laughingly, 'If you are to be my uncle by marriage, Mr. Bear, don't you think you might call me Fanny too?'

Lavinia paced wearily and slowly up to her room. She had understood something of Fanny's nature at first sight, and the meaningless, hard accuracy of the piano performance had taught her much more. She was sad at heart to think that one of her nephews had chosen this soulless, scheming bit of femininity for a wife. But she knew that opposition would only incense him to greater determination. She sighed as she passed into her room. Perhaps, she thought, if no impediment were placed in the way of the marriage, Ralph himself would weary of the notion. Even then, he did not seem to be an ardent lover. Perhaps the fates would be kind. How foolish men were! Even Robert ('Bub') seemed dazzled by the sham effulgence of the woman.

CHAPTER XII

A CHANGE OF PARTNERS

FANNY liked nothing better than to have two or three men to herself, and there was a closer intimacy between her and Cradock and Robert Bear than there had ever been before when the little party broke up for the night. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the intimacy had grown franker rather than closer as regards Cradock, for it would be impossible to attain to any closer sympathy than that which had been experienced in the Southcliff Roads when it was a toss-up if either Fanny or Cradock would ever get to shore alive. But, after Lavinia had departed to her room, the last bars of the restraint of new acquaintance disappeared. Robert himself was less surly than his wont. He even smiled more than once, and the sobriety of his dark eyes lit up in a twinkle at some artistic quip wherewith the girl sought to break through his reserve.

On the following morning the second breakfast was merry enough. Lavinia had schooled herself during the night to evince nothing of the dislike and distrust

with which the newcomer filled her, and when Lavinia exerted herself to be charming she was charming indeed. There was a delicacy about her gaiety which was a lesson to any of the younger school of women—a refinement about her manner of mirth which taught Fanny the difference in their respective breedings more than any stilted aloofness could have done.

‘What are you boys going to do this morning?’ asked Lavinia. ‘Why don’t you take—er—er—Funny to see the model farm and the dairy? I have a lot to arrange. Cyrus and George have both written home for things which only I can find. You’ll excuse me, won’t you?’

She spoke to Fanny with a pretty courtesy which veiled the contempt she felt.

‘Oh, I should *love* to see the cows!’ cried Fanny ecstatically. ‘You *will* take me, Ralph, won’t you?’

‘We’ll all three go, eh what, Crad?’ drawled Ralph. ‘Crad knows a lot more about the beastly cows and things than I do. That young bull hates me, too. And I dislike running. It makes one so hot and uncomfy.’

Lavinia let her eyes dwell for a moment on each of the three. Could this be real love of Ralph’s? Somehow she thought that Cradock cared more for the girl’s little finger than Ralph for the whole of her. What a wonderful thing that two young fellows of such entirely different temperaments should both be

fascinated by the same hollow sham! Well, the three had better fight it out between them. She had made up her mind last night not to interfere in any way.

'You're too lazy to live, Ralph,' said Lavinia, a little sternly. 'How you expect to succeed in your profession unless you cultivate a little more energy, I don't know.'

'Assure you, dear aunt, I don't expect,' drawled Ralph.

'Then do you expect your uncle to keep you for ever—you and your wife?' cried Lavinia. 'Really, Ralph, you are intensely selfish. I should have thought your sense of personal honour——'

'Haven't got any,' drawled Ralph.

'Would have spurred you on to a little manliness now,' she pursued, as though he had not been rude enough to interrupt her.

Fanny felt indignant that such a rebuke should have been administered in her presence. She was beginning to be heartily weary of Ralph's graceful sloth, and, in her heart, fully sympathised with Lavinia's exordium. But she thought that to lecture the youth before her, his future wife, showed a lack of consideration for her.

'Come along, Ralph,' she said, trying to laugh away Lavinia's words. 'Wake up this morning anyhow, and show me the farm.'

'My dear aunt,' drawled Ralph, as he followed

Fanny and Cradock out of the breakfast-room into the hall, 'I know you mean it awfully well, don't you know. But I wish you wouldn't.'

'You are absolutely intolerable,' said Lavinia, smiling in spite of herself. 'Go along, do.'

'Tha-a-nks,' said Ralph, following the others.

It was one of those hot mornings which are sometimes met with in the end of September. The two young men and the girl took their respective Panamas and went out into the paddock laughing. Fanny's hat, dainty and attractive, and very vivid with its brilliant scarlet ribbon and bow, was scarcely more full of colour than the hats of the D'Esterres, with their red, white, and blue club ribbons. It is so old a story that I am almost ashamed to tell it. But it is a fact that Fanny took a scarlet parasol to screen her face. Girls who are going to look at stock always seem to choose the one dangerous colour to set off whatever beauty they may have.

'Hold on, you two,' said Ralph, as he stopped dead still just outside the main entrance and lit a cigarette. 'There's no earthly hurry on a morning like this.'

The drive in front of The Oaks divided into two curving lines as soon as its 'fairway' reached the angle of the house walls. The gravel way to the right led to the carriage entrance. That to the left to the paddock and to the model farm. It was, of course, the latter route which the two D'Esterres and

Fanny followed. It led (through screens of yew and holly) past the offices and outbuildings of the house, to a little wicket-gate which opened on to a five-acre grass meadow. At the further end of this the stock sheds and dairy were seen, and away in the distance beyond these stretched more pasture, and certain fields of 'roots' for the nourishment of the cattle when the grass had lost its savour. Further away, in the blue distance of leafage, were the great coverts which were Robert Bear's especial joy. Here he preserved his pheasants, and here he gratified that lust of blood in the slaughter of rabbits which had once alarmed the sweet-tempered Lavinia with the sheer brutality of it. Past the first paddock, and past the home sheds and dairy buildings, a group of the delicate-limbed timid Kerry cattle came into distant focus.

'Oh, there they are!' cried Fanny. 'I do *love* Kerry, or Jersey, or Alderney cows. I remember that the Daniels had some at Mereby, and I never tasted any milk or butter like that from their farm. And oh! they had not half so many as there are there.'

'Well, Fanny,' said Ralph, lighting a fresh cigarette at the stump of the one he was about to throw away, 'you've seen 'em now. How'd you like to come back and play me something nice and soothing?'

'I'm sure I'm not going back yet, Ralph,' said Fanny, rather briskly. 'Aren't you well? I never saw any one so slack in all my born days!'

'Ha! ha! ha!' laughed Cradock. 'That's right, Fanny, wake him up; he wants it.'

'Oh, all right,' said Ralph, with an air of devoting himself to the inevitable. 'If you must go and pat the ducky-wucky cowsy-wowsies, go and pat 'em and get it over. I maintain for my part that the breath of kye is a much over-rated perfume. But come along. There's that dam bull in the middle of 'em. But never mind, come along.'

As a matter of fact, I am not sure that Ralph had seen the bull. He was perfectly accurate in saying that the younger bull of the herd had taken a dislike to him—as animals will take a dislike to any one with whom they feel they are not *en rapport*. I think it may also be concluded that if he had seen the bull, the fascination which Fanny had once exercised over him would not have been sufficient (at this stage of his life) to induce him to brave the dangers which the taurine enmity might have for him in that further field. But he and his uncle have always been more or less enigmas to me. It is possible that he saw the bull ahead, and calculated on that animal's proceedings and on the probable results from the imminent future.

'Lord, what a lot of fuss about nothing!' said Cradock. 'Come on, Fanny, if you want to see the cows.'

He strode on through the short grass pasture which

had been eaten close during the sweet grass months of May, June, and July by the stock now out in the further meadow, and Fanny laughed and followed him.

‘Here, I say,’ expostulated Ralph, ‘you might wait till I’ve got this alight.’

He puffed his third cigarette into a golden tip and ran lightly after the others.

The fifteen-acre pasture which they were approaching was surrounded by a stout rail fence, or rather post and baulk fence, at least five feet high. Bear had found that even if the cows could not leap a higher enclosure than one of four feet, the light-footed, strong-haunched bulls could jump like stags when they had a mind to display their acrobatic powers. The fifteen-acre pasture was almost bare of timber, save that in the middle of the slope down to a brook at the further end, two huge walnut-trees gave shade and convenient rubbing-posts for any stock which might be fed therein. Near the wall of the dairy was a stout five-barred gate, closed by a strong chain and hook staple, which gave access from the home paddock into the further pasture.

‘Come on,’ said Cradock, slipping the bolt out of the staple and opening the gate. ‘Now then, Fanny, aren’t they pretty?’

Cradock really had the instinct of the agriculturist in him. He delighted in this model farm of his uncle’s, and loved to see the growth of the roots, the cropping

of the sweet grass, the second growth of clover, and all the delicious incidents which make the farm-lands a continual wonder to one who appreciates the ways of our great mother the good brown earth. By himself he had gone among the cattle scores of times. He was familiar with them. Even the young bull (which he called 'Ginger,' as a compliment to his uncle's business) he knew well enough to scratch the nose of and play other pranks with, which animals love to have played by humans who understand and trust them. It never occurred to him that he was not alone, and that the fact that he had others with him, one a complete stranger and the other an old enemy, would affect the goodwill of the herd whom he loved so well.

He walked briskly on into the pasture. There were two herds ranging. One of fifteen cows and heifers gathered about a bull whose muzzle was growing grey, and who fed complacently, rarely troubling to raise his lips from the fodder he needed to enable him to do his duty by his harem; and the other, and the nearer, of eighteen cows, in the midst of which was a young Kerry bull, as graceful and beautiful as an antelope, as speedy as a zebra, as suspicious as a wolf, and as opposed to alien immigration as every sensible Englishman of these days must be.

'Come and see old Billy first,' said Cradock, making his way towards the further herd away to the left of

the pasture. 'He'll be hurt if I don't pay my respects to him first; he's a dear old boy.'

'Where you like,' cried Fanny. 'Oh, come along, Ralph! Please, please, don't yawn about like that. My dear boy, just think how uncomplimentary it is to me!'

'Awfully sorry,' said Ralph. 'Can't help it; you'd better have come with Crad.'

'I'm sure I had,' said Fanny angrily. 'However, you came too, and now that you are here I shall be glad if you'll try to keep awake.'

Fanny had begun to feel herself on firmer ground. She resented this discourtesy on the part of the man to whom she was engaged. Since her arrival at The Oaks, she had noticed the ease with which she had won Robert Bear's favour. She had been charmed at first by Ralph's well-bred carelessness, but now that it was applied to her, she appreciated it at a truer value. Moreover, Cradock was obviously in love with her, and was also obviously a more energetic lover. If either of these youths had to make his way in the world—a way for himself and his wife—it was plain that the more energetic would have the better chance—for Robert Bear was not likely to favour the lackadaisical one of the two. It may have been at this very point of her self-communion, while she was about to go forward to inspect the model stock, that a glimpse of future possibilities came to her. Ralph

always said afterwards, that as the three stood there waiting for Cradock to lead the way to the herd around the old bull, she gave a little gasp and threw frightened glances at each of the brothers. But as Ralph only said this after the great event, I doubt if the actual formation of the dominant plan can be put so early. My readers must judge for themselves.

And here I must again apologise to my readers for my inability to put the motives of this extraordinary woman in a clearer light. I only know the story, her story, and that of the last man whom one would have associated with her. My friends who take an interest with me in this quaint development of artificiality and sheer native simplicity, will place the genesis of her apotheosis where they think right. Ralph put it here, I put it later, at a certain hour in Robert Bear's study, which will be mentioned before this story has proceeded much further.

'Aughm-m-mum!' said the young bull, as the party passed his seraglio and his occupied territory, and walked on the old bull's pasture. 'Aughm-m-m-mum!'

He lifted up his beautifully shaped head, and pawed with his fore-feet, which were as delicate and pure in line as those of any thoroughbred racehorse. He was a small bull, and his herd consisted of small, deerlike cows. But then, his courage had not been affected by centuries of domestic development. He was as brave

and reckless as any wild bull living. And he was jealous of the honour of his cows and of himself. Why should that long, jolly-faced man ignore him and pass on to that old fool of a bull who was about played out? and, above all things, why should that thing with the floppy hide affront him with that horrible insult of colour on the top of it? And there was that fool of a thing who came dawdling about without having as much life in him as one of the toads he disturbed sometimes in the reeking grass in early morning. What was he doing here? He had given him one warning.

‘Augh-m-m-mum!’ he grunted, and tossed his light horns up and down as he pranced and curvetted amidst his admiring wives.

Craddock had too much confidence in the stock to feel any uneasiness at the young bull’s roar. It was a warm morning, and probably the flies were troublesome. He would soon go and bathe in the brook at the end of the pasture. That was all there was about it.

Ralph knew too little to notice the significance of the gallant little fellow’s behaviour. He strolled on, calmly smoking.

‘S’pose that’s the ordinary greeting you get, don’t you know?’ he said languidly to Craddock. ‘Now look here, Fanny, tell the truth. Can you see anything to like in this lot of four-legged brutes?’

'Oh, I think they're loves!' cried Fanny, who was nevertheless a little alarmed by the sullen, ominous threats from the younger bull. Although she belonged to a country town she knew nothing of cows, bulls, bullocks, heifers, steers, or calves. She would not have appreciated the delicious and characteristic ignorance displayed in the statement of our most notorious woman romancer, who wrote that 'bull heifers' were driven in night after night.

'I suppose they won't hurt us, Cradock?' she said.

'Of course not,' said Cradock. 'Come along.'

But the little party of three had not yet reached the spot where the quiet old bull was feeding when 'Ginger' began to advance out of his proper territory. His cows huddled together, whispering to each other that now they *would* see something. Sure Ginger mint ut, and would show p-hwat he mint!

'Augh-m-m-m-mum!' challenged Ginger, looking angrily at the scarlet ribbon and flower in Fanny's hat and at the flaring parasol.

Ralph turned and looked behind. The bull was prancing gaily in the direction of the party. At first he had the absent eye of one who does not look where he is going. But it was a watchful eye for all its apparent lack of direction. When he saw Ralph, the man he knew and hated, stop and look at him, he stayed his capers and bowed his horns to the turf.

For a moment he stood, and then galloped after Ralph with the speed and agility of an eland.

Ralph was immediately stirred from his wonted laziness. With a pace which only his old schoolfellows could have credited, he made for the gate in the rear in a direct line which seemed to him the best adapted for getting him where he wanted to be before that brute of a bull could get at him. Running as he had not run since he ran first to Cradock's second in the hundred yards in his last year at school, he soon had the bewildered bull behind him, and without looking back to see if he were pursued, he made his speedy way to the five-barred gate of entrance. He undid the fastening of the hook staple, slipped through, and then refastening the staple with much care, he looked back into the pasture from whence he had fled.

Ginger had not even troubled to pursue him. He had come to the conclusion that the scarlet in Fanny's hat and parasol was more offensive in the pasture even than the presence of his enemy Ralph. Besides, Ralph had cleared out of the field before he, the bull, had been able to decide what to do. Anyway, there was material here before him for a bull's holiday.

He had another look at that scarlet silk, and, ignoring the fact that his friend Cradock seemed somehow responsible for it, he charged.

'Well!' said Cradock, when Ralph sped at his best pace to the rear.

'O Cradock!' cried Fanny, seizing the remaining escort's arm. 'It's just like it was on the boat. Oh! You'll protect me, won't you?'

Cradock stifled the impulse which inclined him to take her in his arms and swear to protect her from all ill for evermore. 'Of course,' he said simply. 'But there's no danger now. You needn't be frightened a bit. I expect Ralph ran off to distract the bull's attention from us. He's quite harmless. He is really.'

'Oh, look!' cried Fanny, with a half laugh, as she and Cradock and the bull watched Ralph's eager progress across that pasture. 'O Cradock!' she added, a little hysterically, 'isn't he self-sacrificing?'

And Cradock saw the bitterness of her irony and could say nothing to refute it. That man, running at top speed across the grass, leaving the woman he said he loved to the danger he fled from, could not pose as a hero, however hard his brother might try to rehabilitate him.

Then said Fanny, clinging trustfully to Cradock's arm: 'You'll have to save me again, Crad.'

'My darling!' cried Cradock, even as the bull charged, 'I'll save you from the Devil and all Hell if I can!'

And then Fanny knew that it would be better for her to dispense with any further pretence of love for Ralph. Ever since the experience in the Southcliff

roads, she had known (though she had scarcely acknowledged it even to herself) that if she had to choose between the life or the love of Ralph or Cradock, she would choose that of the latter. She had doubted whether Ralph could not afford her the better position in the world which she longed to enter. But since she had been at The Oaks she saw that there was no preference given to Ralph. Nay, rather Ralph's absurd laziness, his bland, insolent contempt of work, would handicap him not only in the struggle with the world which most men have to enter upon, but in the favour of the rich man, Robert Bear. She had seen enough to know that Bear preferred the clumsy honesty and earnest stupidity of the younger nephew to the lackadaisical craft of the elder. And Cradock had, in the moment of danger, betrayed his love. She could have laughed for joy had she had time. Of course she had always known that he loved her, but she had despaired of ever getting him to acknowledge it. Now he had said words which could only admit of one interpretation.

In the midst of her reverie (women are often extremely *mal à propos* in their reveries) she felt herself lifted violently up and borne rapidly over the grass. Then she knew that Ginger had made his shot, and that Cradock, by a skilful dodging movement, had saved both her and himself.

‘Come,’ said Cradock, lowering her to her feet; ‘run as fast as ever you can. I won’t leave you. But drop your parasol.’

She thought he would run to the walnut-trees or to the gate; but Cradock knew better than that. He ran straight to the herd of cows which fed and ranged about the old bull. Old Billy may have been less active than Ginger, but he had weight and experience, and Cradock knew enough of bulls to be certain that Billy would not have Ginger charging among his herd without interposing.

‘Augh-m-m-mum!’ grunted Ginger, looking back after missing his charge, and jerking his neck uncomfortably from an attempt at a toss which failed. Then he saw the passage of the flight, and with lowered head, regardless of the direction in which he was going, and scorning the inanimate parasol, he charged again straight on the track of the fugitives.

A deeper roar came from Billy as he saw what was taking place. He did not like the scarlet ribbon on Fanny’s hat much more than Ginger did. But years and the sobriety of a much-married man had taught him not to be too critical of outward appearances. He could not be too critical of a young bull charging amongst his harem, accustomed as they were to his staid and deliberate love-making. He wanted no young roisterers telling his cows what was the difference between a young bull and one past his

prime. He roared again and pushed his way through his admiring seraglio.

'Come on!' cried Cradock, again lifting Fanny off her feet and whirling her behind a pretty red-and-dun cow, which was watching the unusual excitement of the field with wide-open eyes while she munched her cud in the intervals of cropping.

'Thud!' came from the rear.

'Now you're safe, thank God!' cried Cradock. 'Good Billy, good Billy!' he shouted; 'drive him, drive him!'

Billy had advanced with the dignity due to his seniority, and had met his younger friend's charge with tilted head and well-braced loins. Ginger fell back at the shock.

'Now,' said Cradock, 'run as fast as you can for the gate. I'll see they don't interfere with you. They'll be too busy fighting for a bit yet.'

'O Crad,' cried Fanny, as she laid her hand on his arm, 'I can't leave you till you are safe too! This is the second time you have saved me, when for all Ralph did I might have perished.'

'Oh, nonsense!' said Cradock cheerfully. 'Lord, look at 'em! I wish I had my camera.'

The two bulls had their horns enlocked, and the greater weight of the elder was pushing Ginger back little by little. The great lithe necks twisted, the great lips puffed and foamed and snorted, but the

interlocked horns kept interlocked, and inch by inch the gallant old Billy shoved the young trespasser back towards his proper quarters. The quiet, pretty cows watched with their sweet eyes open wide on their lords. At such a moment as this they regarded these human pygmies as unworthy a glance. See how gallantly their lords fought! And their primitive instincts told them that the fight was for them.

'Come,' said Cradock again. But Fanny would not leave him, so again he hoisted her in his arms, and made the best of his way towards the gate through which Ralph had effected his escape five minutes previously.

The cows stayed and watched the fight of their respective chieftains. Even the scarlet ribbon did not worry them now. The bulls, still brow to brow, thrusting, groaning, foaming, and with every muscle tense, fought and strove for the vantage. And Cradock bore Fanny in his arms as though she were a feather, and ran lightly to the gate. Ralph had the impudence to open it for him.

'Good for you, old man!' he drawled, as his brother bore Fanny into safety. 'Good for you.'

But Fanny turned on him like a fury. 'I'll never marry you now!' she said, clutching at Cradock's hand. 'You coward! Oh, you coward! You are not fit to breathe the same air as Cradock. Oh, you coward!'

Cradock gasped, and clasped her to him. 'Then

will you marry me?' he asked, with a shout of jubilation.

'Yes, yes!' she sobbed, hiding her face against his chest. 'Haven't you saved me twice when that coward—but he's your brother, dear. Forgive me.'

'My congratulations, old chap,' said Ralph languidly, holding out his hand. 'Sure you'll be happy. You know I ain't strenuous enough. That is it. Wish you every joy, Fanny. You've done quite right. But you ought to thank me, don't y' know, for preparing a way before you, so to speak. Ha! ha! ha!'

'You don't mind, old man?' cried Cradock in a rapture.

'Sure you I'm delighted, old man,' said Ralph, drawling more than usual. 'Only thing wanted to make me really happy.'

Fanny darted a glance at him which was not altogether friendly. But his bland indifference appealed to her humour. She began to laugh.

'Thanks, Ralph,' she said. 'You're right. It's all for the best.'

'Now,' said Cradock, 'I must go and separate those bulls, or there'll be the very devil of a row.'

'Oh no. You shan't. You shan't,' cried Fanny, clinging to Cradock's arm.

'Really,' said Ralph, 'I think it'll be a work of supererogation, don't y' know. Look there.'

And as Fanny clutched her new lover to her, and

he had his hand on the hook staple, old Billy drove strongly forward, and sent Ginger backwards. The latter, seeing that he had nothing to gain by continuing the conflict, retreated to destroy the parasol, and to be consoled by his own herd. It was characteristic of them, however, and perhaps characteristic of their human sisterhood, that they greeted him coolly, and looked a little enviously on those other cows—wives of the victor.

‘Yes,’ said Cradock. ‘It’ll be all right now. What a bit of luck!’

‘In more than one sense for you—and me,’ said Ralph coolly.

And then one idea came to all three of them: ‘Whatever shall we say to Aunt Lavinia and Uncle Robert?’

CHAPTER XIII

RALPH ACTS AS PEACEMAKER

Yes, it seemed to all three of them, Fanny, Ralph, and Cradock, that there might be some little unpleasantness incurred in the necessary explanations to Robert Bear and his wife.

Fanny had become engaged to Ralph, the elder nephew, more or less against the wish of the wealthy uncle. She did not know how he had spoken of her when first he saw her. For the matter of that, he did not know it himself, for he had never succeeded in identifying her with that dream-woman whom he thought he had met before. She had won him to ask her to The Oaks, and, indeed, to behave in such a manner that it was no longer possible for him to refuse to do his best for 'the young people' so long as 'the young people' were Fanny and Ralph. But now there had been a new cutting-in and a change of partners. What would he say when he learned that Fanny was to marry Cradock? and what would Lavinia say? They had both been very good so far, but even Fanny could not deny that the new situation would demand an

amount of forbearance from them which was hardly to be looked for.

Then Ralph came to the rescue. He had for some days, perhaps weeks, regretted that passion, that unaccustomed element in his life, had so far swayed him as to make him ask this provincial girl to marry him. He was very well as he was. He liked to bask in the artificial smiles of pretty married women at the tea-table, or to flirt, in a way sufficiently adroit as to be uncompromising, with the latest beauty of his set. He loved the admiration of all women. He remembered something in George Meredith (and it was the only sentence of the master which he had the brains and taste to appreciate) that it might be better to prefer twenty shillings to a sovereign. Now that Fanny and Cradock had fallen into each other's arms with neatness and despatch, he was glad of the freedom which had come to him. He felt kindly, well disposed to this guileless couple. (He thought Fanny guileless!) He had no objection to offering himself on the altar of humour, if he could do it artistically and in such a way as to win credit.

'Don't bother about uncle and aunt,' he drawled. 'I'll make it all right with them, my dear young people,' he added, as he lit a cigarette with a hand which had recovered its firmness. 'You've got one sort of pluck; the brutal animal sort, don't y'know. But I'm not a coward in other ways. I'll tackle

uncle and aunt, and win them over to bless you, my children. I say, Fanny, I hope you're not angry with me for not making more of a fuss about losing you? Ha! ha! ha!

Fanny had felt somewhat indignant at his insouciance. But she had gauged the man pretty correctly by this time. Her personal preference, ever since the sinking of the *Mary*, had been for Cradock. And as yet she had not seen the way which ultimately led her to such a delirious height of golden splendour as was sufficient to turn the head of any Trawlhaven boarding-house keeper's daughter. I purposely exclude metropolitan boarding-house people as being a strange race in strange places. The Marine Parade at Trawlhaven, quaint and deliciously self-assertive as it is, has nothing in common with that viler class of boarding-houses, that sordid, half-washed seraglio of city 'clurks,' which is to be found about Guildford Street, Torrington Place, and that district.

'O Ralph!' cried Fanny, 'you *are* good.'

'Not a bit of it,' said Ralph blandly; 'my advantage.' And here again Fanny looked at him dubiously, as if uncertain of his meaning. 'But,' continued the elder D'Esterre, calmly making rings with the smoke of his cigarette, 'do you want a bombshell on the spot, or can't the swap-over (if I may use so coarse an expression concerning so delicate a matter) be delayed a little? I mean, you don't want to rush in, in mutual embrace,

and cry: "Aunt, O aunt, we are betr-r-r-othed! We have given Ralph the mitten and he weareth the willow! But lo! we are exalted." I suppose you don't yearn for an effect like that? What?"

'Don't be an ass, old man'; 'Oh, don't be so silly, Ralph!' cried the latest pair of lovers simultaneously.

'Then forward,' said Ralph, waving his arm in a lazy, waggly sort of manner. 'Forward to the—er—breach! Fanny, you must pull yourself together and weep on Cradock's bosom when I herald your entry, safe, safe in your uncle's ho-o-o-me. Explain that by his sempiternal intrepidity me brother has won your virgin heart. You still have a war-r-rm regard for me, but Fate hath proved too much. Ha! ha! I must solace me aching bosom in fraternal love, Cradock.' Ralph turned to the grinning youth, with a gesture worthy of Wilson Barrett at the moment of his most strenuous appeal to the gallery: 'Ye have won her! Take her, me boy! Be good to her!'

Poor Crad repeated his former appeal, gurgling with laughter. He was happy in his love, and it came natural to him to laugh. Ralph had always been able to make him laugh. 'Don't be an ass, old man,' he laughed.

'Look here, my son,' said Ralph, suddenly turning grave. 'This is all right between us three, y'know. But no larks with uncle or Aunt Lavvie. You've got to play the game. Come on.'

Ralph went in front, chuckling rather wickedly. He felt a great sense of relief. He had not acknowledged to himself previously, to the mutual declaration between his brother and his betrothed, that he was aweary of conventional love. He was sufficiently a gentleman to disguise from Fanny that he had no longer any desire of any kind in relation to her. But now that these innocent people had taken it upon themselves to release him by their own action, he felt joyous, as recklessly inclined to play the tom-fool as he had ever been in his life. So far as he was concerned it was all right. But his sense of decency urged him to make things as comfortable as possible for his brother and Fanny.

Ralph led the way (and every now and again he looked round with a grin, saying: 'This is my wan smile, don't y' know') to the garden entrance to the great chrysanthemum-house. 'She won't be among the pines this morning,' he said to Cradock. 'Old Macfarlane told uncle that if he had any more weemen-fowk go into the pine-house again he'd throw up his job.'

It was, of course, early for the great cabbage-sized blooms of those monstrosities in the golden flowers which one is accustomed to see on the show-tables. But the early blooms of a different species from the monster vegetable flowers were, to Lavinia's eyes, more beautiful than the curled and combed darlings of the later shows. Ralph thought that he would find his

aunt in the hothouse against the drawing-room, and led the way to the garden door, with malicious or kindly intent as the reader may take it.

Lavinia was there, her thin, graceful figure stalking sedately and lightly along the narrow glass-house paths. Her tenuity of feature gave her an extraordinary distinction. She, dark-garbed, dark-eyed, olive-skinned, meagre, sunken-eyed, seemed a phantasmal genius of the place.

When the ringing depth of her contralto throbbed amidst the Japanese plants and the ferns and green growths, and seemed to hollow the case of ether by its persistent mordant vibrations (as a fine contralto-speaking voice will do), for a moment Fanny wondered whither she was going. But the real honesty of her purpose enabled her to recover herself. It is, I think, the truth that she had first been attracted by Ralph, and then that Cradock's physical advantages, and the chance of life, by sea and land, had forced her to admire the younger rather than the elder brother. Indeed, any provincial woman (and after all these poor inartistic creatures have the merit of possessing more natural impressions than their more elaborately educated sisters of metropolitan, or rather cosmopolitan, society) would have chosen the rough, happy-go-lucky, stalwart, brutally-courageous Cradock in preference to the sleepy, lackadaisical Ralph—if her unreasoning senses left her time for choice.

And herein Fanny was probably shrewd. But she had not yet attained to that greater shrewdness which was to make her a mistress of the art in which she wished to attain proficiency.

'You're soon back,' crooned Lavinia, straightening her back in the way that gardeners have, whether they be amateur or professional. 'And what did you think of the Kerry cows? Were they as good as those you said you knew near Trawlhaven?'

'O aunt!' cried Ralph. 'Here's a pretty go! She's been and gone and left me for a hated rival!'

'My dear boy,' said Lavinia, who loved her nephews out of tender remembrance of her dead sister. 'What can you mean?'

'She's been and gone and left me for a soldier!' moaned Ralph, wiping his eyes ostentatiously. Then seeing that his foolery annoyed Lavinia, he spoke soberly and quietly. 'Really, dear Aunt Lavvie,' he said, 'there's nothing to make a fuss about. Perhaps I was an ass—you know I *am* an ass—to play the fool as I did just now. I'm sorry if I annoyed you. But really, Aunt Lavvie, the situation is more farcical than tragic.' He cast a glance at Fanny out of the corner of his eye, and saw, as he expected, that she was not over well pleased with this statement of the case. She would have preferred him to wear the willow with a little more sobriety and earnestness. But he thought that he was doing quite enough for her and

Craddock by smoothing the path which led to the general acceptance of the marital shuffle—or cut for partners.

‘You see,’ he continued, ‘I’m such a slack sort of chap, and Fanny here is used to the strenuous life. While we have been together, I have constantly been finding myself in situations which required presence of mind and promptness of action. And, hang it! you know, my dear aunt, that what I please to call my mind is always doddering about somewhere at a distance, and what composes my body is never strung up enough to perform deeds of derring-do. The first time I failed to be equal to the situation was on the occasion of the sinking of the *Mary*, that gallant freebooting cutter. By the way, what does freebooting mean? Does it refer to the recent agitation in favour of providing the children of the indigent working man with foot leather?—however, I stray from my point. You know that story, the tale of the swim, the rescue, the recovery. That was hard enough for any man to live through. And, begad, it was a wonder I didn’t catch cold! Now, my dear aunt, a second contrytong, as the French call it, has shattered my hopes of matrimonial bliss. That giddy young bull of uncle’s, that frisky if weighty Ginger, disapproved of Fanny’s headgear, and wished to argue the question of taste at close-quarters. Unlike emotional people of my kind, who always reason with their hearts, Ginger

wished to argue with his head. I remembered that I had my thinnest shoes on, and that the grass was rather damp. There's nothing about that which is not characteristic of me, y'know. So I executed a strategical retreat with praiseworthy rapidity, leaving Cradock to guard the convoy. Again the dear fellow proved heroical. He stimulated old Billy to intervene, and encouraged as lively a bull-fight as ever was witnessed in the pleasant glades of Robert Bear, Esquire. Feinting with great skill, he bore the anxious fair to safety. What else could she do but fall upon his manly bosom, and swear to be his and his alone? and what could that manly bosom do but respond fervently to her dramatic invitation? Come, aunt; don't let's be commonplace and silly. Say bless them, your children. Look at the little darlings waiting for your benison !'

If Ralph had never acted, and Cradock never spoken, Fanny might have loved them both better. It was Ralph's quaint turn of phrase which had attracted her, and as he detailed the course of events which had culminated in the change of partners, her admiration for the slight effeminate man gave her a momentary pang. But Cradock's wholesome strength and cheery countenance brought her to her bearings again. She thought it was time for her to say something.

'Please don't think me horrid, Mrs. Bear,' she said,

hesitating over the formal designation of her hostess. 'It isn't that I like Ralph less, but I know now that I love Cradock. And I believe Ralph knows that he is well rid of me.'

'Perhaps,' said Lavinia dryly. She could not help this honest stroke at the girl. 'But what of Cradock?'

'Ah! You are cruel,' said Fanny, taking her latest lover's hand. 'But I love him, and he loves me. After all, is not that of some importance? He has saved my life twice. Does it not seem as if Providence intended us for each other? Don't you think it would be almost blasphemous to refuse to see that? And oh! my heart tells me that it is right that we should love each other. And Ralph doesn't mind a bit. He likes me just as much as I like him, I believe. But we were both silly in thinking it was anything more. Soon he'll find the girl whom he is meant to love.'

'Lord! Lord!' interpolated Ralph, 'I've found scores of her!'

'Don't,' said Fanny, looking appealingly at the jilted man. 'Don't spoil the splendid way you are behaving by cynicism. O Ralph, I know I have treated you very badly. But I am sure you feel that you are glad to be free. I know you bear neither Cradock nor me a grudge.'

'Devil a grudge,' said Ralph. 'My dear Fanny, I

have already given you my blessing, and am now endeavouring to persuade Aunt Lavvie to add hers.' He looked a little more serious for a moment, and then drew Lavinia's arm through his and walked her off to a distant part of the glass-house.

'It's the best thing, you know, aunt,' said he. 'I know you don't like her. But she's really all right, and will make old Crad a capital wife. It really does seem queer that he should have been called on to save her twice at some risk to himself. It is perfectly true that I lost my nerve and came very badly out of the thing. You couldn't expect a girl to go on admiring a fellow who had left her to look after herself on two occasions, as I have done to Fanny. Can't we let everything go on as though Fanny had always been engaged to Crad from the first? If you will work on those lines, I'm sure Uncle Robert would soon be reconciled to the new state of affairs.'

'But however will she be able to explain the affair to her own friends?' cried Lavinia. 'Really, Ralph, it is a most extraordinary story.'

Ralph shrugged his shoulders. 'Oh, I don't think we need worry much about that,' he said. 'Poor girl! I don't fancy there are many people in Trawlhaven whose opinion need weigh very much with her. Her sister Nellie—that's Mrs. Florance Ford, you know—will understand. I think she always looked on me as a slacker. Old Ford and Florance won't care which of

Uncle Robert's nephews it is, so long as it is one of them, and will be delighted that their connection is to make so respectable a marriage. No; that'll be all right, if you and uncle fall in with the new arrangement. Come, auntie. Say you will.'

The beautiful-featured young man looked up at his aunt with his superb languishing eyes, eyes which few women could deny. He really wished that the affair should be arranged with as little scandal as possible, and as his own engagement had not been formally announced yet to any of his London circle, it seemed as if there need be no great difficulty in arranging what he called 'the swap.'

Lavinia looked down at him—she was a little the taller of the two—and her eyes softened as they met the charm of his gaze. 'Well, well,' she said; 'it's true that I don't like her. But I saw from the first that Cradock was in love with her—much more in love with her than you were, you silly boy. Perhaps it's as well that the thing has happened. I've seen the tragedy of two brothers loving the same woman both before and after the marriage of one of them with her, before now, and I don't want to see it again. Tell me truly, Ralph—though I think I can read the answer for myself—do you feel the faintest jealousy of Crad? Do you still think that you love this girl? If you do, I shall do my best to break off the new engagement.'

Ralph laughed lightly, and took his aunt's hand and

kissed it. 'My dear Aunt Lavvie,' said he, 'I'm delighted that Crad has taken over my responsibility. I was fascinated with the girl for a week or so, but, really, ever after that adventure of the swamped boat I have had to spur my weary spirit to simulate enthusiastic love. Jealous of old Crad! Not a bit of it. And now you mention it, I see that you are right. Almost from the first he has cared for her more than I have.'

Lavinia sighed. 'Well,' she said, 'I suppose the only thing to do is to make the best of it. But, Ralph, I *do* hope she won't enthuse and wish to kiss me, and all that.'

'Oh, she's cute enough,' was Ralph's answer.

Lavinia wore a kindlier expression when she returned to the niche in the conservatory which Cradock and Fanny found extremely comfortable. She held out her hand to the girl. 'I must welcome you, my dear,' said she (and the conventional 'my dear' tasted bitter upon her tongue), 'as Cradock's future wife. I—I wonder——'

She said no more, but Fanny knew that she had restrained herself from saying 'I wonder in what new capacity I shall next have to consider you,' and she added it to a little list of affronts which she was conscious of receiving at Lavinia's hands. Dear Lavinia had not the faintest intention of affronting her. But Fanny knew that she had not succeeded in hoodwink-

ing the elder woman, and resented her lack of success. Women and men frequently saddle others with their own faults, and then they tighten the girths of that saddle and heap weights upon it.

But Fanny gave no outward and visible sign of her resentment. She looked up with a pretty, semi-shamefaced, shy expression, and said: 'O Mrs.—O Aunt Lavinia, you *are* kind to me!' She held up her face so that Lavinia could not back out of kissing it without being markedly reluctant to vouchsafe the caress. She pecked at the proffered cheek.

'I hope you'll be happy,' Lavinia said, 'and I'll explain how it has all come about to Mr. Bear.' Then she took Cradock's face between her two hands, and bent and kissed him on the lips—kissed him tenderly, fondly. 'God bless you, boy!' she said, and the pure resonance of her voice quivered a little with the intensity of her emotion. 'God bless you, and make you happy.'

Cradock's ingenuous heart thrilled in response to his aunt's tenderness. His wide simple eyes filled with moisture. He kissed his aunt lovingly. 'You've always been as kind as a mother, dear aunt,' he said. 'I knew you would see that my happiness lay with Fanny. I knew you would like her.'

Lavinia smiled a little sadly. 'There, there,' she said. 'Take your lady-love away and get Macfarlane to show her the hothouses. Don't worry about Uncle Bub. I'll talk him over.'

She went through the door into the drawing-room, while Ralph strolled on to the lawn to the seat beneath the spreading shade of a mighty cedar. Here he lit a cigarette, and reposed with a blissful sense of all being well with the world.

Fanny and Cradock looked round for a second or two. Then their lips met in a long clinging kiss.

Cradock gave a gasp as Fanny took her mouth from his. He was tingling, throbbing with passion. Fanny knew it, and exulted in her power to move men.

'Come, darling,' said Cradock, when he had pulled himself together. 'Let's go and see Macfarlane. If he takes to you, and he's sure to do that, he'll feed you up with peaches and nectarines. I believe he sends the finest fruit in England to Covent Garden, though I wouldn't let him know that I know it for worlds. But I heard Solomons, the fruiterer in the main arcade there, tell a customer that his best grapes and wall fruit always came from Mr. Robert Bear's hothouses. Ha! ha! ha! How mad uncle would be if he knew it.'

They passed out on to the gravel walk to the white expanse of the great glass fruit and vegetable houses. Fanny felt content. She too, as well as Ralph and Cradock, thought that God was in His Heaven, and that all was extremely well with the world.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BIRTH OF AN IDEA

BEFORE Robert Bear's return from the city, Fanny had reconsidered the matter of approaching him through his wife. The girl's instinct told her that Lavinia did not like her, and she feared to trust the management of her future to the hands of any one who did not approve of her. When lunch was over, and Lavinia rose to pay her afternoon visit to the cool, fragrant dairy which she loved, Fanny went up to her, and holding her head on one side in the coquettish way which she had used with effect many times on both male and female, she said: 'O Aunt Lavinia, dear, I don't think it's right of me to trouble you to explain things to Mr. Bear. To tell you the truth' (and here she laughed shyly), 'I'm half afraid of him, and want to put off telling him how silly I have been. You won't say anything to him to-night, will you?' She knew that Lavinia did not relish being called aunt by her, but when she determined to fight her own battle, she had also determined that it was useless to attempt further to propitiate her hostess. She had

not failed to observe that Robert Bear himself seemed to take very kindly to her, and she could always win men to her side more easily than women.

Lavinia looked at her silently for a moment. Her face was grave and questioning. She suspected some treachery was being prepared, but she had no idea as yet of the nature of it. Probably Fanny was doubtful herself as to her plan of campaign, and would be led by the chance of the minute, in accordance with her usual opportunism.

Bear came down early again, and chatted with the visitor in a way which astonished those who thought they knew him best. He seemed to have no reluctance to calling her by her Christian name—indeed he did it as readily and naturally as if he had done so all his life. Ralph watched the two, and grinned sardonically when his uncle was not looking at him.

It was rather an awkward moment when Bear remarked on the absence of any engagement ring, and chaffed Ralph in a rough, blundering manner, more like himself than was his manner with Fanny. 'I suppose you spent all your money at Trawlhaven, Ralph,' said he. 'Well, well; I suppose now I've made up my mind to act the benevolent uncle, I shall have to see about it.'

Fanny threw a glance of entreaty at Ralph. She did not wish him to refer to the change of partners yet. Ralph reassured her with a grin. 'You're good-

ness itself, uncle,' he drawled. 'My poor purse would never run to anything worthy of Fanny, I'm sure.'

'O Mr. Bear,' said Fanny, 'you *are* kind!' At the same moment she thanked her discarded lover with a look. Ralph began to admire her ability. She was really very clever, he thought.

'Well,' said Bear, 'I'll see what I can find to-morrow. How'll that do?'

Of course Fanny reiterated her thanks, and of course Ralph drawled out more acknowledgments. It was a situation which appealed keenly to his sense of humour. He wondered how Fanny was going to play her cards. Although he probably admired her more than ever by reason of her readiness in dealing with an awkward position, he certainly began to congratulate himself on obtaining his freedom.

Lavinia did not say a word on the subject of the ring. She looked a little annoyed, but did not venture to meet her husband's eyes or to express the wonder she felt at his apparent eagerness to please this wisp of a girl who seemed to be as agile in brain as in body. She was glad that the task of acquainting 'Bub' with the new engagement had been taken from her. She disliked Fanny more and more.

After dinner the programme of the previous evening was followed. Again Fanny hammered at the Erard, again Lavinia retired early, and again the atmosphere of intimacy thickened in the drawing-room.

‘Gad!’ said Ralph with a laugh to Cradock, as the two brothers went to their adjoining rooms, ‘what’s come over our respected uncle? D’you know, Crad, he reminds me somewhat of a dancing bear. And how well the fair Fanny teaches him to prance!’

Cradock flushed up. Though he believed Fanny told him the truth when she said that she had never really loved Ralph, but had loved him, Cradock, from the moment of the rescue in the South Roads, he felt uneasy at any reference to her which Ralph made, and this remark concerning Bear and the girl struck him as being less respectful towards the woman he loved than was right.

‘I don’t see what you mean at all,’ he said sharply. ‘I think you ought to be grateful enough to uncle for offering to buy the engagement ring.’

‘Well, I *am* damned!’ laughed Ralph. ‘Hang it, man, it’s your engagement ring now! Ha! ha! ha!’

Cradock coloured still higher. ‘So it is,’ he said. ‘But anyway, he means the kindness for you as yet. He knows nothing of the change of circumstances now. I wonder when and how Fanny means to tell him?’

‘She’ll do it at the very best time,’ said Ralph dryly. ‘You may depend on that.’

They had reached their doors, and turned to each other to say good-night. Cradock laid his hand on his brother’s shoulder for a moment, and said: ‘You’re sure

you're not sick about it, old chap? You know we couldn't do anything else when we found out how much we cared for each other.'

Ralph laughed again. 'Now look here, Crad,' he said; 'do I seem sick? You put me in a difficult position, you know. If I say I'm delighted you'll think I am affronting your future wife. If I say I'm disappointed it will be a fly in your treacle, my son. But really and truly I don't mind in the least. I am sure that you are much fonder of her even than I thought I was, and my congratulations are thoroughly sincere. Don't go and worry yourself about imaginary misfortunes. Take the goods the Gods provide thee, and be happy, my son. Good night.'

'Good night, old chap,' said Cradock, heartily. 'Let's shake hands for once.'

Ralph held out his hand languidly. He disliked any display of emotion. But he had as much affection for his brother as he had for any one, except perhaps for his Aunt Lavinia. Cradock gripped his hand firmly, and Ralph could feel his emotion tingling in his fingers.

Fanny had already gone up, and her brain and heart were more excited than she remembered ever to have felt them before. There could be no doubt that Robert Bear had been extraordinarily anxious to please her. His voice had softened remarkably when he spoke to her, and she had heard a tone in it which was wanting when he addressed any one else. She

had seen a glimmer in his eyes which she was almost certain that she recognised, and yet how could she believe that this man, of whose stern rectitude the D'Esterres had so often spoken to her, could be foolish enough to make love to her, the future wife of his nephew (though he did not know which one as yet, she thought with a laugh) and under his wife's roof. Yet if his voice and looks did not mean that he was 'smitten' with her, she had forgotten the very A, B, C, of the trickeries of passion. The longer she deliberated upon the events of the evening the more certain she was that Bear was attracted by her. Well, it was only another instance of a man's hypocrisy. This sedate, severe Nonconformist merely supplied another instance of that peculiar Nonconformist conscience of which she had heard so much. She had not come into contact with a Unitarian before, but her vague notions of sects and sectarians (in spite of the little 'cram' she had indulged in before her first meeting with him) led her to class Primitive Methodists (and she had seen something of their ways and manners in the Daneshire villages) and Unitarians all in a lump. And she remembered the case of a prominent deacon. 'I believe it would be worth my while,' she said to herself. 'It is really too disgusting to have one's engagement ring presented to one's fiancés. If Ralph can't buy an engagement ring what is Cradock going to marry on? I suppose the uncle

will make us an allowance. But—but——’ and her thoughts flew far to the glories of the metropolis which might be hers if only she were to marry the uncle instead of the nephew. Of course Lavinia stood in the way at present. But——oh well, of course, it would not be pleasant to have publicity given to the only means whereby she might be driven to divorce her husband. Lavinia looked delicate. Oh! she, Fanny, mustn’t reckon on the death of any one or it would bring ill luck. But how lovely it would be if she were to become the mistress of all the wealth of which she had only had a glimpse. How lovely!

At any rate she was sure that her plan of getting up to breakfast with the uncle on the following morning was a good one. She would then see if she could tell him how things had fallen out with her engagement.

At last she fell asleep and dreamed that she had married Robert Bear, and that she and he were giving a great dinner-party at The Oaks. She sat at one end, smothered in diamonds as large as pigeons’ eggs, and Bear sat opposite her. Lavinia waited at table together with a crowd of liveried footmen.

She remembered the dream when she woke in the morning, and found that it was time to get up if she intended to breakfast at 7.45.

‘How lovely it would be,’ she thought again. ‘How lovely!’

CHAPTER XV

THE IDEA DEVELOPS

SHE was first in the breakfast-room and met the amazed look of the footman who brought in the meal, with a bland indifference, which was extremely creditable in one who generally looked on men-servants with reverential awe.

'I beg your pardon, Miss,' said the man, 'do you intend to breakfast with Mr. Bear?'

'Yes, thank you, Davis,' said she imperturbably, 'I do.'

'Very good, Miss,' said Davis, and proceeded to lay another cover.

Fanny seated herself opposite the tea and coffee services, and looked a bright and cheerful ornament for any man's domestic establishment, when Bear strode with his usual stealthy momentum into the room. As has been already stated, as a rule he hated to have any one to breakfast with him. Yet, at the vision of the girl presiding so pleasantly over the tea and coffee he could not but feel a thrill of appreciation.

'My dear Fanny,' said he, 'you ought not to break your night's rest like this.'

'Oh,' said Fanny, 'I hated to think of your coming down all alone and breakfasting, and then rushing off as if you had no one to look after you. You know you're going to be my uncle, so you mustn't think I'm impertinent.'

She held her head in her favourite one-sided attitude. Her lips wreathed themselves in pretty curves, her dark eyes sparkled. 'Besides,' she said, 'I want to tell you something. But do you have tea or coffee?'

'Tea, please,' said Bear. If his wife had asked him he would have bellowed 'Tea!' 'But really, my dear girl'—(he seemed to take pleasure in the 'dear')—'I'm used to breakfasting all alone. You see I like to get early to the office. But I must say it is very nice to see a lady there. Very nice.'

'You're sure I don't bother you?' asked Fanny.

'I wish I had nothing else to bother me,' replied Bear.

What had come to this sullen, taciturn man—this boorish, mannerless, awkward Orson? Ralph had been right. He did indeed dance to the new tune of Fanny's piping. He smiled as he helped her to the dish she chose, and his manner was the manner of a courtier.

Fanny caught that same glimmer in his eyes which

had caused her such deep cogitation before she went to sleep on the previous evening. Suddenly she said, 'How strange it is! Why, I dreamt last night I was——' she stopped, and looked confused. She never looked confused unless she wished to.

'What? Aha, Miss Fanny! What were you dreaming about? Something about me?'

'Perhaps I'll tell you some day,' said Fanny, playfully. 'But, oh, Mr. Bear, I do want you to forgive me. I've been such a silly girl, and I know you'll think I've behaved disgracefully.'

'Bless my soul, what a formidable prelude!' said Bear, with his mouth full. He could not break himself all at once of his habit of gobbling his food. But he choked down as much as he could before he spoke.

'But really, really,' said Fanny, pleading with her eyes and lips, 'really, will you forgive me?'

'Humph!' grunted Bear. He was not yet so infatuated as to promise to forgive an unspecified offence; he would not yet grant a general amnesty.

Fanny got up from her seat and ran to him. (The footman had not remained to wait at table. Bear would never have a servant in the breakfast-room after everything necessary for the meal had been supplied.) She fell on her knees by his side and looked up at him, and she laid her hands upon him. 'I've broken off my engagement to Ralph,' she said

(and the man started as if he had been stung), 'and—and accepted Cradock instead.'

'Well, I am——'

'Oh, wait, please, please wait,' begged Fanny, bringing the attraction of touch to her aid. He could feel her hands imploring, almost caressing him. His elemental qualities began to stir within him. His face flushed through its covering of hair, his eyes grew strained and parched.

'Cradock has saved my life twice,' she continued. 'Once in the Roads at home, and yesterday from your young bull.'

'I'll have the brute shot,' interpolated Bear.

'And ever since that time, when he swam ashore with me, he has been more to me than Ralph. And, oh! he cares for me a thousand times more than Ralph ever could care for any one but himself. Oh, please, please Mr. Bear, say you forgive me and will forgive him.'

Bear found his own right hand straying to the dark locks which were now touching his knee. Fanny had bowed her head upon her hands, and her hands were laid upon the knees of the man so that her hair fell over them. Presently, before either of them spoke again, that right hand began to caress the hair gently, passing backwards and forwards over it. It was such a caress as a father might give an erring child. But there was nothing paternal in the feelings of Bear at

the moment, and very little filial in the sensations of Fanny.

‘You—you—ahem—you think you—er—er—really love Cradock?’ he asked, and his fingers passed over the hair more swiftly, and pressed a trifle harder.

Fanny debated swiftly in her mind. She believed that she could win the man then and there if she chose, win him from all sense of loyalty and honour. But it would be at the cost of some of the self-respect which she still retained. She wished, if she could, to arrange so that she could have both man and self-respect together. For that she must delay operations. Clearly she must admit a love for Cradock. Indeed she felt some love for him, but not great enough to outweigh her ambition, that ambition of the adventuress which has been responsible for both shame and honour; for gallant deeds and terrible disgrace, for great good and great ill. Bear’s love meant riches beyond her wildest dreams, and riches meant the conquest of London society—so she believed, not without justification. But Bear’s love could not be won with safety then. She raised her face and kissed the hand which caressed her. ‘Yes,’ she answered, ‘I am sure of that.’

Even as she spoke the words she regretted them. But what was the poor girl to do? Unless she had some status in the family there was no excuse for her stay at The Oaks, and she had no mind to leave The

Oaks just yet. Fanny was not in the least wanton. There was none of the eager surrender of passion in her thoughts of self-abandonment to the demands of passion. Everything she did, every word she said, had its proper place in her scheme of advancement. If she found it necessary to act the part of a wanton, she would act it. But it would be a part merely—it was not characteristic of her. She was too cold-blooded, too selfish, too swayed by pure ambition to be guided by the influence (divine or devilish as you please) of Eros. Many a woman who was worse in the eyes of her charitable sisterhood was better in the sight of any one who puts unselfishness, truth, and love before a cold chastity and self-seeking prudence. And though Fanny was no wanton she could hardly be called chaste, because her chastity depended not upon herself or her heart, but upon the exigencies of her climb to social dignities. She was impure in being pure, unchaste while she preserved her chastity. It is no virtue in a woman who has never felt what anti-naturalists call 'temptation' that she has not given way to the call of youth in the spring-time. It is a defect in her nature which has saved her from feeling the call. Whether or no it is virtuous or moral for a woman to neglect the appeal of love in favour of the lilies and languors of 'cold pale Christ'—or rather of the didactics attributed to Him by those who pretend to know Him but know Him not

—is a question for a man of the age or of all ages to answer, not for any petty dogmatic sectarian to prose about or rage furiously concerning in his ignorance and conceit. Perhaps one day the great questions of Life may be relegated to thinkers who are not swayed by party like any paid politician whose salary depends on his compliance with the orders of his caucus. Perhaps one day ethics may be considered as ethics, irrespective of the interpretation which the Bishop of London puts on a certain sentence (probably corrupt) in one of Paul's epistles, or of the verbose explanations of some Yankee-made doctor on his reasons for differing from the bishop, or of some mystic quasi-scientific 'gent' who has a catechism of his own to publish which lacks all the lucidity and most of the morals of that already provided by the Church—the Church which after all has arms which embrace a wider range of speculation than any other systematised belief. When that happens perhaps Fanny and her like will be put in their proper place. As it is, in these days when hypocrisy prevails and towers in invincible progress on all hands, when chicanery is the most formidable weapon in the armoury of success, and blatant vulgarity ensures popularity, Fanny's specious little ways were eminently calculated to enable her to attain her end. Ever an opportunist, she was ready to accept the orthodox teaching of being all things to all men who might aid her in her quest.

In a sense she deserved to succeed. But in what a sense!

It is consoling to recollect that Robert Bear's Non-conformist conscience was at any rate a match for Fanny's idiosyncratic methods of carrying on her campaign.

But I believe that there was more real nature in Bear than in the woman. I believe that he was genuinely carried away by his passion at one time of his life, and that was a sign of generosity of disposition which Fanny never gave. Let the apologists for Bear make the most of that, for otherwise they will be hard put to it to avoid bracketing the man with the woman.

'Yes,' said Fanny, in reply to Bear's question if she was sure that she loved Cradock; 'yes, I am sure of that.'

The man gave a little gulp, and for a very brief moment his hand stayed its tender caress of her hair. Then again his fingers passed backwards and forwards, lingering on the sombre shining locks (for black hair has a glint of its own) and tingling at the touch. 'Ah,' he said. He shook her from his knees, and stood up. 'Of course I forgive you,' he said, and his voice was constrained, harsher, more brutal, more like itself than it had hitherto been when he spoke to her. 'I'll see about the promised ring you know, only it will be for Cradock—happy Cradock. Ha! ha! ha!'

There was a snarl about his laugh, a sneer about the smile with which he now regarded her.

‘Ah!’ she cried, still on her knees, and catching at his hand. ‘Ah! you are angry! You think I have played fast and loose with your nephews. Oh, Mr. Bear, do forgive me. I would rather be beaten by any one else than despised by you.’

She clung to his hands, and pressed them one after the other to her lips. A shudder ran through the great bulk of the stalwart man. Fanny felt it to his finger tips and exulted. She knew that now the game was in her hands.

Bear took her hands (with the game in them) in his, stooping a little to do so. ‘You’re a silly child!’ he said, and his voice trembled as he spoke. No words could have told of tenderness so much as that tremor in his voice.

Fanny gave a little cry of triumph. ‘Ah!’ she cried, springing to her feet, ‘I knew you would forgive poor me! I knew you were kind. I felt it the first moment I saw you.’ (If this were true she was peculiar in her experiences. No one else who had met the spice merchant for the first, second, or third time judged him as other than an uncivil, sullen cur. His wife and sons, his nephews, and a few of his wife’s poor relations spoke of him, and doubtless thought of him, as a man of some benevolence. But Fanny did not mean that he was benevolent. She meant that

she could make him thrall to his passion for her—and that is a somewhat different thing.)

‘Well, then,’ asked Bear, repeating the question which had already been answered, as though he hoped for some modification of the reply—‘Well, then, you really are sure of your own mind this time! You know I meant to get something really good, and it is not worth while to do that if the ring is to be returned and the engagement broken off with Cradock. Tell me, now,’ he pressed her hands in his and looked down at her through his wide-lensed glasses, ‘will you give me your word that you are fonder of Cradock than—than of any one or anything else in the world?’

His eyes burnt their meaning into her. And she saw another chance to improve her position. She looked up at him for an infinitesimal flash of time, and then lowered her lashes demurely over her glittering eyes. ‘I am quite sure,’ she said, ‘that I am happy in my engagement to him. I—I should have to go away from here but for that.’

She gave him one glance, full in his eager gaze, and put as much meaning into it as she could. The hardened, coarse, ill-mannered, middle-aged man was actually overcome for a moment, and stood gasping, pressing the hands he held more than the girl could comfortably bear.

‘Fanny!’ he whispered.

‘No, no!’ said the girl, looking down, and dragging

to release her hands. 'Not now! Oh, not now!—Oh, say you forgive me, and bring whatever ring you like! Tell me, that I may let Cradock know that you have consented to our engagement. Let me be able to tell him as soon as he comes down.'

'And then you'll be able to stay?' whispered Bear.

She felt his breath hot upon her face, and almost laughed at the signs of discomposure in one whom she had been taught to consider as the most self-contained, the most moral, the strictest and sternest of men. A man who had a religion and lived up to it, a man of convictions, a leading Liberal, a prominent Unitarian, a man who took chairs at political and sectarian lectures, and was famous for his public gifts to well-advertised charities. 'They're all the same,' she thought, 'except Ralph, and he is less than a man. There's nothing in him to stir up.'

But though she was laughing riotously within, she wore as demure an outward appearance as the most simple of girls is supposed to wear.

'Yes,' she murmured, no longer struggling to free herself.

For a moment Bear stood holding her, she felt the inclination rise within him to draw her to him and embrace her, she felt the inclination die. It was immaterial to her whether he gave way to it or not. She had her part to play, and the fall of the cards must now depend on Lavinia as much as on any one.

She never thought of the absent sons. As for Cradock he made a convenient excuse for her remaining at The Oaks. The time was not ripe yet for the culmination of her scheming. But, she thought, everything was going capitally.

‘Thank you, Fanny,’ said Bear.

‘Do you—do you like me to pour out your tea?’ she asked, her head at the coquettish angle for the first time since the drama had developed to a crisis.

‘Yes, my dear,’ said Bear; ‘I do. But, well perhaps you’d better not breakfast with me again, just yet. Er—er—er Cradock will like to have you with him, I expect.’

‘It seems so lonely for you,’ said Fanny, peeping up at him with her head on one side. ‘I don’t like to think that you, who are so kind and who provide all the splendid things here, should have to eat by yourself, pour out your tea, and all that, as if there was no one to care for you.’

Now it had never occurred to Bear before that he was ‘hardly done by’ in being obeyed. He had always thrown cold water on any previous attempt to encroach on the sacred privacy of his breakfast. Now suddenly it seemed to him that it was hugely unjust that he, the fountain of all the good things about the house, should be left to himself. Yet he was rational enough to understand even then that there was only one person whom he would care to

have with him at the breakfast-table. And it would hardly do to have her there every morning until her position in the household had become more of a recognised thing. He was as yet no more ready than she to brave all decency and convention to arrive at his desires.

‘You are a good-hearted little girl,’ said he. ‘Well, we’ll see about it later on. I must say that it was very pleasant to see you at the end of the table this morning. At any rate you won’t be leaving us yet, will you?’

‘Oh,’ said Fanny, ‘I will stay as long as ever you will have me. I never enjoyed myself so much in my life, in spite of this unpleasant little change,’ she added, laughing more boldly than she had done previously during the morning interview with her host. ‘I was unhappy last night dreading what you might think of me. Now you’ve forgiven me—and oh! I do thank you so much, so much!’ (The minx again seized his hand and kissed it.) ‘I shall be as happy as the day is long, and you’ll try to let me do something for you, won’t you?’

Then an idea came to Bear; for some weeks he had been engaged on a history of the growth of Unitarianism in England, from the recantation of John Assheton in 1548 to the existing regulations, curriculum of teaching and accepted tenets of the Unitarian Home Missionary College at Manchester, having special

chapters and side lights on Unitarians in London, and on his own particular Lodge or chapel of which he was a prominent, indeed the most prominent, benefactor. Lavinia, despite her love for the man, was inclined to pooh-pooh his Nonconformist enthusiasms in her mellow contralto. His sons were frankly bored by them, his nephews entirely uninterested. Fanny had, thought Bear, shown both judgment and keenness of insight in her remarks at the Ford dinner at Trawlhaven, and she would make a very pleasant secretary.

‘If you really wish to help me,’ said he, ‘I fancy I may find up a way. But look at the time. I have missed my usual train. Don’t worry, Fanny, I’ll see everything is all right. Leave it to me. Good-bye.’

He strode out, snatched at the hat and coat which lay ready for him on the hall table, and walked swiftly on his way to the station. It was his almost invariable custom to walk the quarter of a mile to the local station, and this morning he felt especially in need of exercise and fresh air.

‘Ah!’ said Fanny, sinking back into her chair and pouring herself out another cup of tea, ‘*that’s* all right!’

She drank the tea, rang the bell and coolly gave Davis orders to remove the *débris*, then she went upstairs to her room to prepare for the second breakfast, and to consider how best she should inform

Craddock and the others that she had won the uncle to consent to the change of husbands.

‘Things are moving rapidly here,’ she said to herself with a light laugh. ‘I might have stayed in Trawlhaven all my life without having so much adventure as has fallen to my lot within the last forty-eight hours! But I thought he liked me that night at William Ford’s. Well, if all goes well, I shall have more money than ever Nellie dreamt of, but whether it will be respectable or not I don’t know yet, and to tell the truth I don’t much care. Still, I mean to try for the highest position I think there’s a chance of getting, and that’s his wife’s, so there!’

And the ‘he’ she thought of was not Craddock.

CHAPTER XVI

FANNY WRITES TO HER SISTER

ON a certain morning, a little more than a fortnight after Fanny had partaken of her first *tête-à-tête* breakfast with Robert Bear, Nellie Ford received a letter from her sister which made her think, vaguely, that there might be more dramatic phases of life than even her fruitless love-affairs, than even the delirious excitement of a lunch or tea with Dr. Ap Jones, or a lieutenant from some gunboat engaged in fishery protection. Nellie was essentially provincial. She had achieved the limit of her ambition by her marriage with Florance Ford. Despite her continual claims to be in love with some new object or other, she never suspected that the game at which she played might be carried on in earnest by her husband. Had she known it, there were elements of as great dramatic interest to be found at Trawlhaven as at The Oaks, or even in the revered metropolis itself. But she did not know it, and Fanny's letter gave her a feeling of envy that her younger sister should be enjoying her existence with a far brighter vividness of colour than

she, the wife of one of the foremost men of Trawlhaven, could ever hope for. Fanny had written but one short note during the first few days of her stay with the Bears, and in it had said nothing of her change of partners. Ralph had chuckled sardonically over the bland manner in which she dismissed her people entirely from her calculations. He had watched the progress of his brother's love-affair with Fanny with some amusement for three days after the adventure of the bull, and then made an excuse to get back to town. He had seen more than he wished to see, and doubted his eyesight. Lest further illumination should render him blind, or desirous of the calamity of blindness, he decided to absent himself from The Oaks for a time. He would be the better able to gauge the position, or the development of the curious imbroglio which he suspected if he came back to the scene and *dramatis personæ* fresh from other interests and other people. Cradock was so fascinated that he never troubled to ask if Fanny had made her father and mother, or her sister and brother-in-law acquainted with the turn of the wheel. Lavinia had put one or two suggestive questions to the girl as to her people and their wishes, but, as she found that her innocent desire to know how the Trawlhaven folk looked on the new arrangement was resented, she had sunk into a silent passivity. She had once, it is true, thrown out a hint or two to her husband of the questionable propriety of Fanny's

action, and as to the advisability of communicating with the Butlers or the Fords, but Robert Bear had answered her with more than his usual boorishness, and Lavinia (on whom the hand of phthisis began to press hard) relapsed into an acceptance of the position with some uneasiness at heart. So far as the Bears and D'Esterres were concerned, Fanny might have kept the secret of her change of lover as long as ever she liked from the old folk at home. But Fanny herself came to the conclusion that it was time to let them know how things were going, lest they should become anxious about her (and she knew that her mother was capable of running up and presenting herself at The Oaks if she thought she could advantage herself by so doing) and make themselves obnoxious in any way. So she asked Cradock to leave her to herself for a whole morning while she wrote 'home letters.' She found that it was no longer necessary for her to ask Lavinia to leave her to herself. Now that her hostess saw that her guest was so very much at home, so pleasantly entreated by her lover and her host, she, Lavinia, was content to brood by herself. And every day found her brooding more quietly, more sadly, over her past life, over her absent children, over the change which she began to see in 'Bub.'

So Fanny set herself to her task and wrote:

'My dear Nell, perhaps I ought to have told you before, but really I didn't see that it made much

difference, so I didn't. The fact is Ralph and I have found out that we are not suited to each other.' 'Now there,' said Nellie. 'What a silly girl to throw away a chance like that!'

'What is it, old woman?' asked Florance, who was sitting at the breakfast-table opposite his wife, while his eldest son spooned porridge into himself, relieved with an occasional mouthful of fried sole.

Florance had been late at 'the club' on the previous night, but later elsewhere, and was not feeling well that morning. His perky moustache had a droop to it, and his sharp inquisitive eyes were a little swollen and heavy. He had been unable to find his vest when he woke that morning, and the explanations which the production of another one had entailed (for he did not use a dressing-room) had irritated him.

'Oh, it's all right after all!' cried Nellie.

'Oh rot,' said Florance, and tried to eat a devilled kidney.

The letter continued, 'so we agreed to break off our engagement. To tell you the whole truth, Nell, dear, ever since our adventure in *The Mary* I have felt that Cradock was more to me than Ralph, and when he saved me from one of Mr. Bear's bulls, while Ralph ran away as quickly as he could, I could not help showing it. And it seemed that Cradock had loved me all the time too. Ralph was very nice about it. I believe he has always felt ashamed of himself in my

presence, and was not sorry to be "off" with me. Anyhow, I am now engaged to Cradock instead of to Ralph. I was afraid that there might be some unpleasantness here. But Mrs. Bear was very quiet about it,—she is very quiet about most things—and Mr. Bear behaved quite charmingly. What do you think, my dear? He actually went up to town, and brought down such a lovely ring for Cradock to give me. I couldn't help laughing a little, because, in the first instance, he had offered to bring one for Ralph, and I felt a little ashamed when I told him that, after all, I was not going to marry Ralph, but Cradock. However, no one could have been nicer. It is a half hoop, with three *huge* diamonds and a whole lot of quite large brilliants. I should think, from the prices I have seen marked up at Roach's in the High Street, it must have cost him quite fifty pounds, if not more. But then, of course, my dear, fifty pounds is nothing to him. We used to think that Florance's father was rich, and did things well. But, my dear, I assure you you've no idea of Mr. Bear's wealth. It is not that it stares you in gold or ormolu all over the place, but it is the quiet acknowledgment by every one on the place that "money is no object," as we used to say. I do not think that Mr. Bear is half so rude and coarse as the D'Esterre boys used to make out. Anyhow, he has been very very kind to me, and I've been only too pleased lately to help him a little in some literary

work he is engaged on. He said he bought the ring because he thought it would suit me!’

‘I should like to see that ring,’ said Nellie aloud.

‘I wish the devil you’d either keep quiet or say what on earth you are talking about,’ said Florance.

‘No, my son, you are not to have any more marmalade. You’ve jammed yourself all over as it is. I say, Nellie, I wish you’d teach this kid not to wipe his jammy hands on his face.’

‘O Florance!’ cried Nellie, ‘you ought not to swear so before him!’

‘I didn’t,’ roared Florance. ‘I said jammy hands, and they are jammy.’

He rose and rang the bell hard. ‘Tell nurse to take Master Florance away, please,’ he said. So the child was borne off sucking the supplemental marmalade from his fingers.

‘Now then, Nellie,’ said Florance, ‘I can say devil if I wish to, I suppose, and what the devil is that letter all about? I can see it’s from Fanny. What’s she been up to now? I hope to God she hasn’t been fool enough to fall out with the Bears. The governor’ll never forgive her if she has.’

‘Oh, *do* keep quiet,’ cried Nellie. ‘You shall have the letter as soon as ever I’ve read it. No. She’s getting on with the Bears very well.’

‘The hothouses here are splendid, and the Scotch gardener, Macfarlane, is one of the most famous in the

kingdom. There are pines and grapes such as I never saw or tasted before, and as many as any one can eat, and the peaches and nectarines are delicious. Macfarlane is generally cross if any are taken, but Mr. Bear has given him strict orders that I am to be allowed to help myself whenever I wish. I believe I am more of a favourite with Macfarlane than Mrs. Bear is. But then she's so funny and quiet, though I dare say she's very nice, and the boys crack her up tremendously. I've told you about the bull; well, Mr. Bear has the loveliest lot of Kerry cows and bulls, and the cream and milk and butter are wonderful. We used to think a lot of it if Mrs. Daniel sent us over some of her old cream. Why, Nell, it can't hold a candle to what we get here by the quart. I don't know when I shall get home again. Mr. Bear says he wishes me to stay as companion to his wife as long as ever I can, because she's so fond of music, and he admires my playing so much.'

'Fanny never could write grammar,' said Nellie. 'I suppose she means that Mrs. Bear is fond of her playing.'

'I thought old Bear took to it very kindly,' said Florance, looking up from the morning edition of the *Daneshire Press*.

'Oh, *do* be quiet and wait till I've finished,' said Nellie, giggling. 'You shall have it then. Here, take this first sheet.'

'Now that the season is over, mother can do better without me than with me.'

'So she always can,' interpolated Nellie. 'Why, the girl has been of no use in the boarding-house for the last two years! But let me go on.'

'For God's sake, do! and shut up,' said Florance, who was chuckling over Fanny's first lines.

'You might tell her and father about Cradock. It will be awkward if they have spread it about that I am to marry Ralph. Of course, Mr. Bear would not allow any definite engagement before we came up here, and I begged ma not to say anything till it was all settled. Now it is all settled with Cradock, and they can tell who they like. Write and congratulate me, dear, and tell me if you have been having any good times lately. I can't imagine how any one can have a good time in that wretched hole, Trawlhaven. Everything is so different here, and though I have not been up to town with Mrs. Bear yet, they have promised to take me up to a theatre and supper at the Savoy. Think of that, and how often we have talked of it, and how pleased you were when Dr. Ap Jones took you to lunch at the Troc. My dear, the Savoy is altogether different class to the Troc. Mr. Bear would never think of taking me to the Troc. Oh, I do wish you could see how I am enjoying myself. If only I am half so happy after I am married as I am here, my life will be a continual delight! But one can't expect that, can one?'

‘Oh dear, what a tremendously long letter I’ve written. But I wanted you to be the first down there, at home, to hear about it, and you’ll tell every one now, dear, that I am engaged to Mr. Cradock D’Esterre, Mr. Robert Bear’s nephew. I hope Florance is well and jolly, and hasn’t been drowned in that beastly motor boat of his. Give him my love, and tell him——no, you’d better not. But write me a nice long letter with all the news. If you hear any one refer to that absurd rumour that there was something between me and Dick Baldry, contradict it at once. As if I would marry a herring salesman, however hard up I was. No, indeed. I am meant for something very different to that, and I promise you, my dear old Nell, that I won’t disgrace either you or Florance by marrying into a sphere which either of you could object to. With much love to all of you, from your loving sister,

‘FANNY.’

‘*PS.*—If you have done with that fawn-coloured chiffon, you might send it to me, dear. I badly want another evening gown, for they dress for dinner here every night, and my old black is getting quite an eyesore, though Mrs. Bear never wears anything but black. I think she must have wardrobes full of black dresses, all of the finest material. I wish I had her dresses and her dressmaker, I’d soon show her how to carry them so that they should not look so insignificant as they do on her. She is, I should think, a kind woman to those

she likes. Of course, I get on well with her, but she's not so friendly as Mr. Bear. Smooth it over to mother, that I may not go home for some time. I think, if father sent up one of his best oils of the Broads, I might sell it to Mr. Bear. He was asking about his work only the other day, and thinks he remembers some of it years ago! Think of that. He, Mr. Bear, has a magnificent picture gallery; but then everything is magnificent here. It must be splendid to be so rich. Cradock has to go up to London to-morrow to see about his work. But I don't expect to be lonely here. There is always something to see or do, and there is Mr. Bear's literary work, as he says I am a capital little secretary. It's all about Unitarianism. Do you remember that awful time when Mr. Ford began to slang the Unitarians at his dinner-table? I thought I should have died. Well, all this writing is about Unitarians and Socinians. I don't know what these are. But they seem a sort of former strain of the Unitarian breed, as Florance would say. Mr. Bear says that it would not be wise of Cradock to marry till next year, and that, if I can, he hopes I shall stay on here as companion to Mrs. Bear. He says I shan't regret it, and it won't do to fall out with him, will it, now. So explain everything to mother, and ask father to send the oil, if he has a decent one. It is no good sending any of that rubbish of his, all blue, purple, and yellow like a parrot rather than a broad, or woods; I know

he calls that French, and Mr. Bear *hates* French style.

'*PPS.*—Don't forget about the chiffon. I believe Mr. Bear thinks of offering me a frock. But I can't accept that. Can I?'

'*PS.* number 3.—I've read this through, and there's a lot about Mr. Bear there. Don't show it to any one but mother. She will understand. Just give father and Florance my messages. That's all. They might chaff me horribly about Mr. Bear, though he is old enough to be my father and has been so generous about Cradock and I shouldn't like to be chaffed about him, and shouldn't like any one to have silly ideas about him either. You see he is all Cradock and I have to depend on—for I don't believe Crad has ever had a brief in his life yet, any more than Ralph has ever had a commission to design as much as a pig-stye.'

'Oh well, it's too late now,' said Nellie, impatiently. 'The silly girl should have put it at the beginning. She might have known I should read it at the breakfast-table and probably show it to you. But it's all nonsense. Of course no one could be so silly as to chaff her about Mr. Bear.'

'Ha! ha! ha!' roared Florance. 'I'm not so sure of that, old woman. As she says, there is a devil of a lot about Mr. Bear. But the whole story is too delightfully funny. First one nephew and then the

other, and now she seems to be making up to the old boy himself. Ha! ha! ha! Oh I *must* tell the governor about this. Oh these Nonconformists and their literary work and diamond rings. I can't understand the governor sticking to his beastly chapel! Well, old gal, I think it's a pity that there is a Mrs. Bear already. I always said that Fanny was an ambitious girl and would go far; and, damn it! if the old boy were a widower I believe she'd marry him, willy nilly! As it is, he'd better look out! she's as smart as paint is Miss Fanny. Good luck to her!

He drank off a brandy-and-soda to which he had helped himself from the sideboard. 'Ah! I wanted that,' said he. 'Now I must be off to the works. Do you want the car to-day?'

'No,' said Nellie. 'I shall run down and see ma.'

'Do,' said Florance. 'But mind that Jacky doesn't make himself so beastly sick with the cheap jams she buys for the boarders as he did last time—there's a good girl. The doctor's bill comes to more than the value of the goods consumed.'

'O Florance, you *are* horrid!' said Nellie. 'Will you be in to lunch?'

Florance had an appointment with a married lady of his acquaintance whose husband was going up to town for the day only, and proposed to lunch at her house. 'No,' said he; 'I've got to take a customer of ours to the club. Good-bye.'

'That's all right then,' said Nellie. She, too, had an innocent engagement, which she thought the height of delightful wickedness. Dr. Ap Jones had promised to give her a plate of soup and some gristle and pastry disguised as a *pâté* at Herrick's, together with a glass of syrupy port. Fashionable vice could seemingly go no further, and Nellie was thrilled with the sense of wrong-doing very cheaply. The sense of wrong-doing has its charms, but most of us have to pay too dearly for it. We are most of us unable to delude ourselves that we are being other than idiotic when we make pretence of vices which we have not.

Really in some ways Trawlhaven was almost as up-to-date and metropolitan as it thought it was. But perhaps the comparison of 'Herrick's pastrycook shop' with the Carlton or Princes, to say nothing of the Ritz, may serve to show the difference between the sham and the real styles.

To appreciate this it is necessary to have lunched at Herrick's and to have tasted the soup of that establishment. Or it might serve if one could have witnessed the meeting between Florance and his married woman *inamorata*. In either case there is a certain refinement about the West End *maison* or *femme*, a certain responsibility and devil-may-care humour, a something distinguished from all the *bourgeoisie* which is the hall mark of 'class,' the hall mark which no provincial implement can impress.

But the rolled gold is happy enough; and Nellie went off in sublime contentment to her soup and 'patty,' and to her 'ma.'

'Lor', Nell,' said the latter worthy lady, 'I do believe as she's done well for herself at last. Well, that is a good job. Of course your father shall send up the best of his paintin's, and if Mr. Bear will accept of it I'm sure he'll be welcome. There, my dear; give us a kiss. You were the first to put fut on the ladder, and now I do believe as Fanny means to foller.'

CHAPTER XVII

CYRUS AND THE FAIR CHICAGOAN

A MONTH or so after Fanny's letter was read at Florance Ford's breakfast-table, another letter was read with even greater astonishment. Cyrus Bear had made his way out to Chicago, and found that hearty reception which most famous commercial Englishmen may find in that commercial centre of the world. Cyrus did not appreciate the advantages of American hotel life, and was glad to accept an invitation from a Mr. Meredith K. Maple. Mr. Maple had not made a great success of life, but his old Knickerbocker blood gave him, even in the heart of plutocracy, a certain distinction. He had met Cyrus and remembered that he had five unmarried daughters, and that one of them, Niobe, was exceeding fair to look upon, and possessed a voice to charm the birds off the trees. Maple's home was cast more in the lines of the English home than were most of the Chicagoan domestic establishments. Cyrus was soon so weary of the eternal boast of the Western Yank that it delighted him to be introduced into a small

circle where some refinements of manner were still observed. It was true that Niobe said 'Amurrica,' and twanged her native harp through her nose on occasion as well as any tough of the Bowery could do. But she was nevertheless a charming girl. Her face was radiant with good-nature and humour. Her blue eyes glinted and glowed and sparkled with sheer delight in life. She had the humour of a refined American, and the chastity of an early Victorian aristocrat. She could laugh and chatter so sweetly that she could make any companion forget whatever troubles might be weighing on his heart, and she could sing as nature's singers sing, sing with the enjoyment of a full pure soprano, and with that flowing melody, that glorious outburst of music which no instructor of voice production can ever teach. She was a born singer, and a born flirt. Cold and pure as the snow on the Rockies she loved, she was prepared to go to any extent in search of amorous amusement save to the last extent—the end and aim of all illicit love-making. There she balked. She would never be physically unfaithful to any husband she might take, and never give the man she married a moment's ease of mind if he loved her so that it worried him to see her tantalising flirtations with other men. In a way she may have been a nature-sister of Nellie Ford. But Niobe was beautiful, full of gaiety and humour, a woman to yearn for, to murder out of sheer rage at the

provoking tantalisation of her. Her bowed lips were nearly always wreathed in a smile of enjoyment, humour, or taunt. She was, I believe, the most enticing little woman that ever pressed mother earth with her dear dainty little feet. There was not an atom of vice in her. But she drove men mad by the promise of her manner and eyes, by the promise which she never meant to keep. Cyrus Bear was no goody goody mammy's boy, though he loved his mother Lavinia dearly. He had lived the life of a public school lad, and the adolescence of the average youth about town. He was a young tiger, but he had tasted blood often enough. He was at the zenith of his physical excellence. He was no man to lay siege to a girl for the purpose of bringing her to shame and dishonour. But he was no match for Niobe. His whole entity leapt to her as soon as ever he saw her. He yearned, he ached for this beautiful brilliant girl, this taunting nightingale of dainty flesh. He had had his flirtations, his boy's intrigues, his calf loves. But he had never longed and hungered for a woman as he yearned and hungered for Niobe. She delighted his mind as well as his body. Her bright dialogue, her brilliant repartee, her quaint 'Amurricanisms' all fascinated him till he could have borne her away in his arms and made 'his woman' his mate—for he knew that this was the only woman for him; that he must either fail mentally and physically from sheer longing

of love or take her back to England as his wife. He was a strong-bodied, honest-hearted man, was Cyrus, sweet tempered, and long-suffering, affectionate, and kind. Of all the men I have known I never knew one I loved more than Cyrus Bear, dear, dark-eyed fellow, good comrade, unselfish friend, true and gallant lover. Some day it may be my fortune to write a story which will treat of his life more fully than this can spare space for. But here and now I can say how I loved Cyrus Bear, and how—but that must work out in the tale.

And I admit that I loved Niobe as well as I did her husband. But that again has little to do with this story of our woman of character. She had her way with these two whom I and all who knew them loved. She had her way and lived to remember it.

When Cyrus asked his love if she loved him, she said she did—and I hope that she spoke the truth, and that these two had at anyrate a year of happiness. He knew that he ought in all propriety to have written home to have asked his father's consent to his marriage with this Chicagoan beauty before he spoke of his love for her. But American girls permit freedoms from men whom they only regard as friends. I do not mean that they are freedoms which any honest girl might not permit to any man. The system is different. An American girl will go out driving with a man, sit up with him late at night, go to

theatre parties with him, and all without any idea of accepting him for her husband, and still less with any notion that he may take advantage of her leniency and treat her as a wanton. Cyrus did not understand this. He thought that the privileges which Niobe and her people allowed him were something out of the common, and that he was practically accepted as her future husband. He had lost his heart at first sight and hearing. He thought that in any event he was bound to ask her to be his wife. He did so, and she agreed to marry him and sent him into the seventh heaven of delight—because however much an honest lover may think that he has received encouragement, it always comes as a surprise to him that the woman whom he has set above all others, whom he has enshrined in his heart as something holy, should ever consent to be his wife.

And the very morning after his formal proposal and acceptance by the Maple family came the letter from Lavinia.

‘My dearest son,’ said Lavinia, ‘I was so pleased to hear from your last letter that you were enjoying your trip and had found some nice friends in Chicago. Please give my kind regards to Mr. and Mrs. Maple, and thank them for being good to my boy. George is away from home but sends good accounts of his holiday, and Eddie has gone to Davos. But we have not been lonely here. It is such a strange story, dear, that

I hardly know how to write about it. You may remember that cousin Ralph and cousin Cradock went down to Trawlhaven for their holiday. Well, it seems that they met a Miss Butler there, the sister of Mrs. Florance Ford of Ford and Son, the herring people whom you must remember in connection with your father's business. First it seems that Ralph got engaged to this girl. Your father went down to Trawlhaven to see about it, but came to the conclusion that she would not be a bad match, as she was connected with the Fords. Her father was, I believe, an artist. But I fancy there is something about the family that is being kept in the background. However that doesn't matter to you, dear, now. Well, it was understood that Ralph wished to be engaged to this girl, Fanny Butler, and your father asked me to invite her to stay here so that we might see what sort of girl she was before we actually agreed to the engagement—for you know, dear, that your father will have to set the young couple up in life, and though he is so well off now, he naturally hesitates about taking money from his children for the sake of my nephews. But he is so good. He has always been so good to my people.'

'Yes,' said Cyrus, who did not appreciate the languid affectations of his cousin Ralph, 'that's all very well. Of course the firm is mighty prosperous now, but I don't see why the pater should keep the whole

boiling of the mater's relations. Hanged if I do. However, probably it'll only be a few hundred a year and that can't matter to us.'

He would have liked to make Ralph work for his living with some show of energy, because his love of the Rugger football field had taught him that energy is a good thing. But he was too good-hearted a fellow to grudge any allowance his father might think right to make his cousins. And he loved his mother too dearly to regard the D'Esterres as cuckoos in the nest.

He continued to read. 'So the girl came here three weeks ago. She is a curious-looking girl, with her hair neither short nor long. I suppose she used to wear it short and is now letting it grow. She reminds me of a black cat. She is so lithe and agile, and her dark eyes shine so in the gloaming. She has wonderful dexterity on the piano, but can get no music out of it in my opinion—and Harold Mortimer, who came down the other week end, agrees with me that she is merely mechanical. But my letter is growing so long, and I haven't said half what I want to say. The day after she came here she went to look at the Kerries with the two brothers, and it seems that young Ginger (as Cradock calls him) charged them, and that Ralph ran away. You know the poor boy never had much presence of mind.'

Cyrus burst into a laugh. 'Gad!' he cried, 'I

should like to have seen 'em. Presence of mind ! Ha ! Ha ! He never had an ounce of pluck. I've seen him funk a scrimmage before now, and that day he played three-quarter for the village when George was ill he never tackled a man more than half his own size, and never held on to the ball till he could pass if there was a chance of his being collared. Oh, I know all about Master Ralph. But what is the mater aiming at ? It isn't like her to give all this prelude without some serious news. Humph !'

'And Cradock took her up in his arms and saved her. He had also swum ashore with her when a sailing-boat sank in Trawlhaven Roads, and when Ralph kept behind in a lifebelt. So the bull brought about the climax, and Cradock said he loved her, and she found that she loved Cradock. I must say Ralph doesn't seem to worry much about it. I think he was happier after the engagement was broken off and Cradock took his place. So now Cradock is engaged to her. But both he and Ralph have gone back to town, and the girl is still here as a companion to me, as your father wishes me to have a companion and thinks I admire her playing. He does, your dear father does, but I don't. But then I don't wish to vex him, so I pretend that I like it, and that I am pleased to have her here as a companion. But I feel that I don't understand her. It was she who told your father about the change of lovers, though I had

consented to do it myself. And I can't quite make out why she did it. It seems that she got up and breakfasted with your father and told him then—and you know how he used to hate to have any one breakfast with him, except you or George when you were all going to the city together. Anyhow, she persuaded him to consent to her engagement to Crad, and he brought her down a really lovely ring for an engagement ring. I can't make out what has come over your father. He is brighter than I have seen him for a long time, and he comes home earlier and dresses for dinner. You'll find the place very different from what it was when you went away. Of course I am very glad to see your father brighter and more cheerful, but I can't be quite easy at such a change at his time of life.

'She is very pleasant to me, and tries to do things for me which I don't want done. I believe that she wishes to make herself useful to me and does her best to help me. But I can't say I altogether like her, and sometimes I wish you and the other boys were at home. I have not felt very well lately, Cyrus. My cough is more troublesome. But I hope that I shall get stronger soon.

'Don't let your father know that I am uneasy. I expect it is all my nonsense. I'm getting a fanciful old woman, and that's all about it, dear.

'I shall be pleased to see you all home again, but I

don't think Eddie will be back before the spring. I hear disquieting accounts of his health. George comes back next week.

'Good-bye, my own dear son. Never forget that your mother loves you dearly.'

'Oho!' said Cyrus. 'Now let's see what the pater says.'

He opened the letter in the small sloping writing which he recognised as his father's. It was the writing of an insignificant man, small, even, and illegible, without being characteristic of anything but the commonplace. It was not at all the sort of writing one would expect from a man of Bear's type. But perhaps its twists and even thickness showed the secretiveness and the under self of the man, which were not known to others.

'Dear Cyrus,' wrote Bear. 'Don't stint yourself for money. I told you so at the outset. Make a good appearance over there for the credit of the firm. Of course I don't expect you to gamble your money away. But don't stint yourself. I send you another five hundred pounds. We have been more comfortable here, lately. Your mother may have mentioned to you that Cradock D'Esterre is engaged, and that the lady he is engaged to is staying here. She is a most interesting person, and of great assistance to me in my *History of English Unitarianism*. It must be a great pleasure to your mother to have her here, and I have

consented to her remaining as companion to your mother. She plays magnificently. But you'll hear her when you get back. Now, my dear boy, don't forget that I shall be glad to see a grandson to carry on the name we have made, and if you can find a millionairess so much the better. Camphor went up threepence last week, but cloves and nutmeg keep steady. We expect to do an enormous trade with the Fords this herring season, and this Miss Butler to whom Cradock is engaged is connected with that firm. Don't think of coming home before you have seen everything there is to see, and cable if you want more money. I'll let you know if you are wanted.

'I don't think your mother is looking very well, but Miss Butler cannot fail to be a great comfort to her. Your affectionate father.'

'Humph! that's all right,' muttered Cyrus, looking at the draft enclosed. 'I never knew the pater so free with his money before. This letter is not at all in the style of his parting words. Has he had a stroke of luck? Or what is it? Don't seem to be keen on my return either? Wonder what he'd say if he knew what I meant to do? And who's this Fanny Butler? He seems to think a lot more of her than the mater does! It can't be that——! Oh no! That's too ridiculous! By Jove!'

The jolly fellow lifted up his head and laughed aloud. He could not even for a moment suspect his

father of an intrigue with any one. But what did it all mean ?

‘The monkey will come in handy,’ he said. ‘Hanged if I don’t fix up the wedding before I go home. The pater asks me to cable if I want any more cash. I’ll cable him before the honeymoon, and take Niobe home as a bit of a surprise packet. They are sure to love her when they see her.’

The Maples were not disposed to balk Cyrus of his wish. In less than a month after he had received the puzzling letter from his father, he had married the girl he loved, and started for Yellowstone Park for his honeymoon. From there he proposed to proceed homewards in easy stages, letting his father know when he wanted money, and keeping the folks at home advised to a certain extent of his whereabouts. He had no sense of anxiety about his mother, and the few weeks following on his marriage were probably the happiest of his life. No doubt he and the Maples should be blamed for making the marriage an accomplished fact before the parents of the bridegroom knew anything of the matter. But they knew that Niobe had enough charm to conquer any father and mother. The events that were taking place at The Oaks they neither knew nor could be expected to know, and so they cannot be blamed for failing to take these into their calculations.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE LIBRARY

GEORGE BEAR did not return home until a month after Cradock had left The Oaks, and then it was too late. Even if he had got back before, he would have been able to influence the course of events but little. He was weaker, more boyish, more afraid of his father, and more selfish than his elder brother. He was, too, very sluggish-minded, and he did not understand why it was that home seemed so different from what it used to be till some weeks after he had experienced the difference.

Even the sight of his father dressing night after night, and coming home half an hour, or even an hour before dinner, did not greatly surprise the youth. Besides he was not much at home, preferring to spend the greater number of the week-day nights at the rooms which he was permitted to keep at The Albany. On Sunday, Harold Mortimer or some other fellow generally accompanied him down to The Oaks, and it was not till his mother spoke that he began to understand. And then he was helpless.

After Cradock returned to town, it would have seemed natural for Fanny to be more in the company of Lavinia. But at this time Lavinia showed her weakness. She scorned to doubt her 'Bub,' and at the same time felt too ill and despondent to struggle with the doubts which pressed upon her. She tried to make a friend of the girl. But she tried feebly, and Fanny felt the insincerity of the attempt, and knew that she must trust to her influence with the husband for her future rather than to the proffered, feebly proffered, friendship of the wife. Indeed she had now come to a determination in which the friendship of the wife could have no part save to make the younger woman's treachery the more abominable. Had Lavinia been a healthy, strong, energetic woman, Fanny would have hesitated to play the game she had chosen so boldly. Whether she laid herself out to compass the death of the unhappy wife will never be known. That she did so morally is certain. Whether she meant to do it is another matter. But, even if she did not admit it to herself, the result of her action, and the delicacy of the fading woman, must have been taken into account by her shrewd mind. For she must have known that Lavinia would have no strength to fight for her husband with an unprincipled hussy such as she was. And as soon as ever her secretaryship brought her into close contact, night after night, with Robert Bear, she laid herself out to win him.

The wonder of it is that he wanted so little winning. Both he and the girl made a pretence of work when they went to the library on Lavinia's retirement to her room. But both of them must have known that the mere fact of their sitting up alone together, night after night, was sufficient to damn them in the eyes of ninety-nine people out of a hundred. If they did not know it, why did they at first discontinue their regular practice when George paid one of his rare visits to The Oaks? Soon they had gone so far that they recked nothing of George or any one else, and they blandly retired to the library after Fanny had given a display of her pianoforte powers.

As yet no word of love had been spoken between them. As yet each had kept up the farce of work, of gratitude for patronage on the one hand and of polite regard for the companion of his wife and his secretary on the other.

But the presence of George produced a disturbing element in both of them.

Bear opened the library door and let Fanny pass through. His study-table stood in the embrasure of the window which opened on to a terrace overlooking the lawn on which stood the mighty cedar. An electric lamp stood on the table, as yet unlit. There was no light in the room but that from the flickering flame of the logs in the open fireplace. Bear switched on the centre group of lights and walked behind Fanny

to the table. Here he sat down in his swivel-chair. He had closed the door behind him. But he knew that none of the servants would dare to disturb him in the library, and he had no doubt that George would go straight to bed or to have a last chat with his mother.

‘I hope your son won’t think it strange, Mr. Bear,’ said Fanny.

She stood at his side, and her hand passed over his shoulder playing with some papers on the table. Her hair, now growing long but not yet ‘done up’ fell against his face. The fragrance of the woman affected him. There is no more maddening appeal to the senses than the fragrance peculiar to the woman we love.

‘Oh, George!’ said Bear contemptuously. ‘Why should he? He is too dull to notice anything except his dinner.’

‘Besides,’ said Fanny, shaking her head so that her locks trembled and swayed against the skin of the man’s cheek, ‘there is nothing for him to notice. Is there? There’s no reason why I shouldn’t sit up and write for my future uncle? Is there?’

‘None whatever,’ replied Bear, with a shiver of passion.

‘Shall we begin?’ asked Fanny.

Bear did not answer her, but suddenly his arm swept round her waist, and he pressed her to him furiously, till she felt the unromantic busks of her corsets bite into her flesh.

'O Fanny!' was all he said.

She did not struggle. She simply seemed to lose the power to stand and fell on her knees beside him. His arm unclasped and she laid her arms across his knees and her face upon the meeting of her wrists.

Her slim frail body shook and shook till it communicated a frantic intoxication to the man.

He bent down above her, and stroked her hair. 'Fanny,' he said, 'Fanny, oh my darling! Don't cry. I couldn't help it. I couldn't restrain myself any longer. I wouldn't hurt you for the world, Fanny. I'll never let you suffer. Never.'

This sullen, boorish man became a new personality under the magic touch of Eros. The subdued strength of his nature thrilled and vibrated through the air and struck on the girl's senses. She had meant to bring him to her, to make him confess that he loved her. Ah! She was ready to sacrifice her honour purely to win the wealth and unlimited patronage of this plutocrat. She did not love him. She never really loved any one but herself and her ambition. As for love she loved Cradock better than his uncle. But at the moment the restrained force of the man with the taciturn reputation shook her. She would have yielded to him apart from her opportunist plans. She could not have resisted the power of his wooing, the power which was the more irresistible because it had

grown from lack of use. He had never properly wooed a woman before. Never properly felt his blood tingle for a woman before. His marriage with Lavinia Swallow had been a humdrum affair. He had wanted a wife, and Lavinia had a certain charm in those days which had appealed to him. Ah! She always had a charm which always appealed to some of us, God bless her, the good pure woman!

Now Bear felt that the world would be well lost not for the love of this woman but for the enjoyment of her. His mighty animalism, long dormant but never dead, leapt to life and energy at this moment when Fanny made her bid for victory. He was no more master of himself than any athletic boy in his first glut of passion. He alone can tell whether he had had that moment in his mind from the first, whether he knew from the first whither the fascination which she exercised over him would lead if time and opportunity assisted. Perhaps he trusted too much in his own power of restraint. But unless he intended to make her his mistress, why did he press her on Lavinia as a companion? He cannot have deceived himself with the notion that Lavinia liked her! Why did he institute those lonely sessions in the library, sittings which he must have known to be what the world calls 'improper'?

Fanny's conduct is intelligible enough. From the first she set herself to attain to the control of wealth

and the position which wealth brings. She was not unchaste in her nature. But she had no such respect for the purity of her body as a really chaste woman has. She sacrificed it to her projects without a moment's hesitation, even as she sacrificed whatever sense of honour as a woman she may have owned.

And now was her time of struggle. If she did not bind Bear to her now by such ties that he could never undo them she would have to leave his house, and the brilliant future which she had imagined would be lost for ever. Her eager little brain was puzzling all the time she was on her knees beside him. 'Is he gone on me enough? Can I make him do what I like? If so, let old Lavvie look out? Now then, I must see what I can do.'

She put his hand aside from her hair and rose to her feet. Her eyes were aflame with excitement, and the man thought it was with love. The radiance of her glance scorched his senses. He sprang up from his chair and threw both arms about her and pressed her to him, seeking her lips with his mouth. A little, almost inaudible, cry came from her, a tiny *cri d'amour*, for never had she been so taken possession of by any man before. She felt, despite herself, that here was her master. She might win him, but she could no longer play with him. The animal had been roused, and would rage furiously until its desire was satisfied. She had had a vague idea of feeding him on 'sops

of vinegar and sops of oil,' but he had seized her and meant to decide the nature of his diet himself.

His lips clung to hers, and his breath came and went in harsh rasping halations. She could feel the outline of his teeth upon her mouth; she could feel the indraught of his tongue pressed hard against his palate. For a moment the girl lost control of herself. She knew that she had no shadow of control over the man, and now she felt frightened at the savagery of the brute whom she had called to life. No woman but has some sense of the majesty of maidenhood about her. And Fanny's coldness had preserved her physical purity hitherto. But this was something with which she had not reckoned. Probably she did not mean to give herself utterly till she could step into Lavinia's shoes. At all events she did not mean to give the fish the bait so soon. If she could not have won him for a husband without making Lavinia divorce him, she would not have thought twice about sacrificing her honour. But then that would have been done intentionally, of malice prepense—with a definite purpose in view. She disliked being carried out of herself and beyond her purpose. But she could not help herself. She certainly would not risk the scandal and ridicule of an appeal to others in the house by any clamour for help. Besides she did not want help. She was won by the might of the man's desire. It thrilled her and impassioned

her so that soon she was panting with him, kissing with him, frantic and mad with him.

There was a sob in his voice as he felt her self-surrender. 'Ah, Fanny,' he moaned.

She clung to him as he lifted her and strode across the room to the switches of the electric light. In a moment the room was in darkness.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FOOTMAN AND HIS CONSCIENCE

A LITTLE before Christmas the respectable Davis sought an interview with his mistress. Winter had fallen with a severity to which we are getting unaccustomed in England, and the paddocks and pastures of The Oaks were over a foot deep in snow, and the mighty spreading boughs of the great cedar on the lawn groaned and creaked with their burden. The Kerries had long been housed in their well-ventilated sheds, and the glass houses sent forth volumes of smoke and the stifling reek of coke from their furnaces. Still Fanny remained at The Oaks as companion to Lavinia. There was a bitterness in the pretence which was wearing away that good and sweet woman faster than phthisis. But as yet she did not know the extent of the treachery which was enveloping her. She saw that her husband was, as she thought, foolishly infatuated with the coaxing ways of the 'companion,' but she had no suspicion that he had given himself body and soul to the madness of his passion. One often hears of the insane fits of senile

love which make old men sacrifice fortune, honour, and name for some minx of sixteen. But the corruption of a man of middle age, little past the prime of life, a man so generally reserved, so highly respected (and disliked) as Robert Bear, is rare. Lavinia had never given such a possibility a thought. She fretted at the absence of Cyrus, at the rare home-comings of George (for George found that he could not stand the companion, though she endeavoured to fascinate him), and at the continued ill-health of her youngest son, which had sent him to Cairo after leaving Davos. But she still had perfect trust in her husband's marital fidelity.

The respectable Davis was to surprise her.

'If you please, ma'am,' said he, 'I am wishful to give notice.'

He drew himself up to his extreme height and clasped his hands, in perfect symmetry, a little below the bottom button of his waistcoat.

Lavinia felt very tired that morning; the night before there had not even been the delay of piano playing before Robert Bear and Fanny Butler made their way to the library to grapple with the history of Unitarianism. Lavinia had attempted to show an interest in this great work, and had asked to be permitted to look at some of the chapters already written. But her husband had pooh-poohed her and said that she would not understand it, and that as a

churchwoman she would disapprove of what she did grasp. She had been thrust away from this interest which kept Robert Bear and Fanny so much together. But she did not know that it had now become a mere pretext for the facility of carrying on a guilty intrigue.

‘Why, Davis!’ she said, ‘I’m sorry; I thought you were contented and comfortable here. You know I always wish all my servants to be comfortable. Is there any complaint you have to make which I can put right, do you think? Have you had any unpleasantness with any of the others? I shall be sorry to lose you after all these years, and so will your master, I am sure.’

She looked kindly at him; she had always taken an interest in her household, and endeavoured to make her place as homelike as possible to all of them; and this man, Davis, had been such a capital footman, so civil, so ready to oblige, so willing in his work, and so prompt in his obedience, that she had regarded him as one of the best of the servants in the house. Why should he want to leave?

‘No lady could ha’ been a kinder or a better mistress than you, ma’am,’ said Davis, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. ‘No, I haven’t no complaint to make; the place is as comfortable and the work as light as any man need ask. But a man has his character to think of, ma’am. And there’s

things a-goin' on in this 'ere 'ouse as I can't put up with no longer.'

'Why, Davis!' cried Lavinia, 'what do you mean? Surely there is nothing wrong going on in the servants' hall?'

'If all the suvvants 'alls was as 'olesome as this is, ma'am,' said Davis, still shifting from foot to foot, 'there'd be fewer scandals about the gals or the men eether, ma'am. No, ma'am; they're as nice an' re-speckable a lot in the suvvants' 'all as ever I want to work with. It ain't that, ma'am; and I beg you, ma'am, to take my notice and not to ask me no more.'

He stayed his shuffling, and stood still with his eyes downcast. He felt intensely sorry for the lady before him. He had always felt a great respect for her. She was not like many mistresses, always interfering in her servants' hall. When he had had that bad attack of influenza she had not been content with providing him with as good medical attendance and nursing as if he had been one of her own family, but had even gone herself to his room to inquire if there were anything else that he wished for. Despite her extreme quietness, her kindness, and her reluctance to interfere in the household work, Lavinia was loved by every one of her household. But loyalty is independent of love, and loyalty is a rare quality to find in servants. Davis had it. Therefore Davis was the first to give notice.

Lavinia sat silent for a moment. Then she leant

her lean frail body forward, and spoke in that low penetrating voice of hers which few could withstand.

'I don't wish to pry into your affairs, Davis,' she said. 'But is there anything I can do to help? You've been a good servant to us for six years. I don't like to take this notice from you without trying to learn if there is any trouble of yours which I can relieve. Tell me frankly. You are a young man, Davis. I am old enough to be your mother. Come, is there anything I can do to help? Forget that I am mistress, and you are servant for a moment. Think of me as a friend.'

Davis, who had gone to The Oaks as a page-boy at the age of sixteen, was emotional, as many domestic servants are. He lifted his coat sleeve to his eyes like any child, and began to sniff.

'It ain't right, ma'am,' he said. 'It ain't right, and I can't a-bear to see you put upon no more. I 'on't stay in the 'ouse where there's such goin's on, such deceivin' of a good lady. I'd rather give my notice, please ma'am, and if you would find a some-un to take my place before the month is hout, I should take it as very kind of you, ma'am. I can't bear it no more, and I 'on't.'

Lavinia was growing seriously alarmed. What could there be to upset this poor youth to such an extent. Even then she had no notion of what she was to hear.

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She said nothing for a space, and Davis burst out again: 'I know I hadn't ought to ha' looked, but I had my doubts ever since that mischievous 'ussy took her breakfast along o' the master monce ago. I don't wish to speak out o' my place, ma'am, but you hadn't never ought to ha' let her come 'ere.'

Lavinia caught her hand to her side. What was this that she was hearing. Her ears seemed dulled. A film came before her eyes. Had she been blinder before ever that cloud shadowed her sight? Had she put her faith in a man in whom faith was not? She could not speak. Breathless, panting, with her hand pressed to her heart, she waited for this hysterical comic footman to continue.

'I know it ain't my place,' said Davis. 'I told Crosse' (the butler) 'that it was his dooty more than mine. But he said that when I'd lived in the world as long as he have, and seen as much of 'igh life, I should know better than to worry my 'ead about a little thing like that! He said as he wasn't a-going to make no mischief. He had other work to do, and then he went on a-polishing the glass as if he hadn't 'eard me.'

'What is it then that you have done?' said Lavinia—and the hollow richness of her contralto was now but a toneless hiss of exhalation, a wheezing escape of the breath—but it was the breath of her life. 'What is it that you say was not your business, and that

Crosse refuses to interfere in? Oh, speak out, Davis. Can't you see that I must know.'

Davis's eyes winked and blinked. His emotional fervour had carried him further than he meant to go, but there was no backing out of it now. Well, after all, they could not refuse him a good character. If they did—of course he meant if his master did, for he trusted his mistress—he would make things hot for Mr. Robert Bear, Esquire, the spice king. But there was his mistress before him who had always been so kind to him, and at a time when kindness meant something to the boy who had not been ruined by the callosity of a board school education.

'I watched 'em through the Venetians,' said he. 'They didn't think to turn 'em flat one night or to close the shutters. I had had my thoughts as all on us ha' had. And I stole out on the terrace and peeped through. Ah! And on more than one night. Writin'! Writin' in the libuary! It's kissin' an' cuddlin' most disgraceful and indecent! I didn't trust my eyes on one night only. Oh! I ha' watched 'em over and over again, and if ever you take it into court, ma'am, you may rely on me. I'll swear to what I saw any time, and that poor young idgit, Mister Cradock, a-thinkin' as he's a-goin' to get a lovin' wife and all! Why, not one of us men in the suvvants' 'all would bemean hisself by taking up wi' her. If Master Cyrus had been at home, I'd ha' spoke to him.

But Master George ain't much good, and he ain't orfen 'ere.'

Lavinia's eager, forward attitude shrank into collapse. Her thin shoulders drooped down till she lay back in her chair. Her chin fell up and her head back till the sinews and muscles of her worn, scraggy neck (once beautiful with its delicacy of line and purity of tint) showed horribly beneath her skin. Her eyes closed and she breathed quickly, gasping harshly, and with difficulty.

Davis moved forward from his correct position. The footman had merged in the man. He had upset his mistress, whom he revered. He dared not summon assistance under the circumstances. Had he been right to speak? He had not intended to do so when he entered the room, but she had stolen his thoughts from him. He could not keep her shame to himself. Ah! That brute of a master! What did he not owe for the suffering of this pure, noble-hearted woman!

'The bloody 'ypocrite!' he muttered. 'The blasted, cantin' blackguard!'

Lavinia lay back but a few seconds, then her eyes reopened, and she forced herself up on her seat.

'You realise what you have said, Davis?' she asked. 'You would not, oh, you would not pain me with such awful lies! You can't have been mistaken! Oh, can't you? Are you sure that you saw—saw—what you

just now said you saw? May there not have been some mistake?’

Davis started to shuffle his feet again. ‘I won’t tell you no lies, ma’am,’ he said. ‘And I can’t tell the likes of you *all* I saw, but I saw enough to make a witness for you if you ever make up your mind to make him pay for what he has done! You’d get the case, ma’am, easy enough. For I’m not the only one what has seen ‘em carryin’ on together. Oh, it’s ‘orrid, ma’am! Sarah laugh at what she ha’ found in the bedrooms when makin’ the beds! I can’t see nothin’ to laugh at! Though Crosse say it’s what one must always expect in ‘igh life. ‘E say as if ‘tain’t one thing, ‘tis another, and he ain’t surprised as the master ha’ been took by the gal. He say as she’s a very takin’ party, to his mind, and he ain’t a-goin’ to make a enemy of her.’

Lavinia rested her chin upon her hand and peered into the glow of the fire. Then she said, ‘Leave me now, please, Davis. And please withdraw your notice for the present. I will send for you when I have made up my mind what is to be done. You say that there are others who have seen this. Can you make them hold their tongues? Please withdraw your notice for the present, if you have any respect for me, and I think you have.’

‘Oh, yes, ma’am,’ whimpered Davis. ‘It’s for your sake, as I can’t a-bear to see you put upon.’

Lavinia smiled wanly. ‘Then I’ll let you go when

I have made up my mind that I can spare you,' she said. 'If you wish to help me, you'll stay on for the present. Pray do not breathe a word of this to any one else, and do what you can to make the others hold their tongues. The thing that would pain me most would be that this should get about. Thank you for your loyalty to me, Davis.'

She held out her poor, bony hand, and the footman, after looking doubtfully at his own, took it. It was an honour which he appreciated to the full and which he understood.

'Thank you, ma'am,' said he. 'I'll do whatever you wish.'

'That's right,' said Lavinia. 'I wish to be left alone till I ring or go down. See that no one comes up.'

'Yes, ma'am, thank you, ma'am,' said Davis, and backed out of the door.

CHAPTER XX

LAVINIA 'LEAVES IT TO HER PARTNER'

LAVINIA rose from her chair and locked the door. She trusted Davis to see that no one interfered with her privacy, but she knew that he could not control the actions of her 'companion' Fanny Butler, and she could not bear to confront her just yet. Then she seated herself again, and sent the wonder of the deep mystery of her eyes peering into the glow of the gleaming logs. The fire had burnt to a still heat. There was no smoke rising from that golden heart of the woodfire. The salmon faded to primrose, the pink died to oxlip, and the death of the embers went to grey ash without reek of murk. She had thought that the crisis of her life would be when her lungs refused to supply her heart with ichor. She had long looked for the day when she would pant out her last breath in the presence of her husband and of her children, all of whom were so dear to her. Despite the contemptuous indifference which Robert—her 'Bub'—had scarcely tried to conceal from her for some years past—(he! the dull-souled animal, only

to be roused by brutal primitive instincts!—she still cherished the illusion under the influence of which she had married the man of her parents' choice and spent many happy years with him. Now that dream was dissipated by the horrible reality. She thought that if he had been unfaithful elsewhere she would not have been so hurt. If he had carried on the amours which many city men carry on apart from their homes she would not have felt the insult to herself so keenly. She would not have known that there was only one inevitable end. She had, in earlier days, mixed with the wives of other commercial magnates and had heard their sorry details of their husbands' infidelities—ay, and wondered that women could be so disloyal to the men with whom they had thrown in their lot as to talk about such scandals outside their own roof-tree. But Robert—her 'Bub'—had always seemed so aloof from all such weaknesses as this! He had pained her often by his lack of courtesy or by his indifference to her feelings, by his boorishness, his coarse sullenness and lack of refinement. But she had pardoned those failings for the sake of the love which she believed was hers. She did not think that he knew that he hurt her by his manner. She did not know that he did not care a grain of ginger whether he hurt her or not. And now this horror which had come to her from the most despicable source struck her amazed! Could it be

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true? She knew that Davis would never have dared to invent such a falsehood. She knew it was true. Now that she sat in contemplation she recalled a thousand evidences that it was true, a thousand evidences of her husband's perfidy. How could she have been blind so long? Oh! what was the use of looking back? What was she to do in the future? What could she do which would be most for the benefit of her children? She thought nothing of herself, and she would rather have sacrificed herself than Robert. Even in that bitter moment she had some understanding of the man, and knew that he had been confronted with forces in his nature of which he had been ignorant. But the woman! This Fanny Butler, who had first betrothed herself to Ralph D'Esterre, then to Cradock D'Esterre, and while still pledged to marry Cradock had consented to be the mistress of the husband of her hostess, and the uncle of the man to whom she was betrothed, what could be said for her? Could she, Lavinia, die happy thinking that her 'Bub' was the slave to this unprincipled wanton? Could she even die happy thinking that one of the sons of the sister whom she had loved so dearly would marry such a woman?

It was only natural that she should do Fanny an injustice in respect of her purity. Fanny was no wanton, she had not given herself naturally, by sheer natural desire—although at the moment of her sur-

render the man's vast magnetism had affected her senses. She was a practical person. She had sold herself for a future. She had paid a price which may have appeared less to her than to some women. But she was no vicious, hungry Messalina. For my part, I think she would have been more worthy of respect if she had lost her honour from passion, from the power of true love. But that is neither here nor there. It is certain that Lavinia did the woman an injustice by regarding her as a wanton. FANNY WAS NOT WOMAN ENOUGH TO BE THAT!

What was she, Lavinia, to do?

Well she would go down to dinner as usual (there was no one expected at The Oaks that evening), and see if she could come to any decision in the presence of the two whom Davis had accused, and whom she now knew well enough to be guilty.

Yes; she would do that. But all the time she knew that there was only one end for her. She knew at heart that the tale was true. She knew at heart that she could never raise a scandal against her 'Bub' to the detriment of her sons. There could be only one end. She knew it. She thanked God that disease had made that end so easy—that this fall of snow and this bitter weather had come just at the time when she most wanted it.

'Well, Bub,' she said, when she found her husband talking to Fanny in the drawing-room a few minutes

before the dinner minute; 'are we to have George at home for Christmas? And is he going to bring down any friend of his?'

'Harold Mortimer is coming down, I think,' said 'Bub.' 'He is Cyrus's friend rather than George's, but he can't go to his Uncle Bunch's this Christmas—Ha! ha! ha! you know why! So I've asked him here.'

'Oh, yes,' said Lavinia. 'Well, shall we go in to dinner?'

Crosse had just announced in his suety voice that dinner was ready. He had been a little severe with Davis that afternoon. That foolish youth did not seem to understand the ways of 'high society' and might make unpleasantness which it was Crosse's chief business to avoid.

During dinner Lavinia watched her husband and her companion.

- By this time their intrigue was so old that they had become familiar in a marital way. Bear no longer laid himself out to be especially courteous to Fanny. But, on the other hand, he watched her needs as closely as ever, and tuned his voice to a very different gamut from that to which his wife had been accustomed in the old days. Yes. There could be no doubt about it now that her eyes were opened. She could see the difference in Fanny's face, the difference between the maiden and the mistress. She, Lavinia, could not mistake it. How could she have been blind so long?

She spoke very little during the meal. But that was not unusual with her. Bear and Fanny chatted with their accustomed vivacity (and the idea of Bear being vivacious would have been laughed out of consideration as impossible but a few months previously), and Lavinia sat and watched and made up her mind.

'Do you wish for any music to-night, dear?' she asked her husband. 'If not, I'll go up to my room. I'm tired to-night.'

'You always are tired now,' said Bear rudely. He had not often been rough with his wife, but she was beginning to get on his nerves now. To see that sweet-souled, pure-eyed woman going about her diurnal business without a suspicion of the baseness which was soiling the air she breathed in her very home galled Bear's conscience. 'Well,' he thought, 'she doesn't know! But I wish she would not look so like a martyr!'

'Oh, I'm tired myself to-night, Uncle Robert,' said Fanny, with a glance at the man which made his blood leap.

'I'm far too tired to play the piano. I don't mind writing a little if you wish to go on with the history. But I've been looking up your notes nearly all day, and to tell you the truth the history will interest me and the piano won't.'

'Ah!' said Lavinia. 'Well, then, I'll bid you both good night. Good night, Bub,' she said. She stepped

gently forward to the place where her husband was standing with his back against the fireplace. They had long abandoned the formal rising of 'ladies' after dinner, and Bear did not smoke.

There was a hoarseness in Lavinia's rich contralto as she laid her hands on her husband's shoulders and looked up in that stern, sullen face, in the magnetic eyes which were more terrifying than lovable. 'Good night, Bub,' she said. 'Oh, good-bye.' She shook a little as she spoke, and Bear shook himself free of her hands irritably. 'Oh, good night,' he said. 'You seem a little feverish to-night. I hope you'll be better in the morning.'

'I hope so,' said Lavinia, looking in his face with an expression he must have been Fanny-mad to have been unable to read. 'O Bub! I wish the boys were at home!'

'Now, for Heaven's sake, don't get hysterical,' said Bear. His wife had never been hysterical, but he thought it a good adjective to apply to her evident emotion. 'There! There! They'll be home soon. Good night. Good night. Try to get a good night's rest.'

'Yes, Bub,' said Lavinia. She nodded to Fanny and went out of the room.

'Come along,' said Robert. 'We'll get to our history.'

'History!' said Fanny. But she followed him to the library all the same.

'Mrs. Bear was very funny to-night,' said Fanny, when the library door was closed behind them. 'She doesn't suspect anything, does she?'

'Oh, she's often silly like that,' said Bear, with injustice. He would, perhaps, have done better to remember his wife's character at that crisis in her life.

It was praiseworthy in both Bear and Fanny that the papers of the Unitarian history were arranged on the table and preparations made for continuing the work.

Neither Fanny nor Bear had taken especial notice of the Venetian blinds, nor of the fact that the great mahogany shutter panels had not been closed, despite the coldness of the night. The library was warm and cosy, the shadow of the eaves and trees outside prevented the sheen of snow from piercing through the interstices of the blinds too obtrusively. Fanny took up a pen from the table and dipped it in the ink. 'Shall we get on?' she asked, with her head on one side and the challenge of sex trumpeting in every flash of her eyes.

'My darling!' said Bear, and took her in his arms.

Lavinia did not go upstairs immediately she left the dining-room. She walked into the hall, and then, with a wan smile she raised her skirt and looked at the thin dainty slippers on her feet. Her bosom was covered with a thin composition of black lace and

chiffon. She had nothing on her head. As she stood on the tiles of the hall she coughed, and pressed her hand over her heart.

She listened for a moment. Crosse came out of the dining-room and went into the passage towards the offices. There was no one near. Lavinia softly slid open the door to the drive and stepped outside into the snow, closing the door behind her.

Crosse passed the hall again and thought his mistress had gone up the great stairway to her room. 'She's a fool not to see't,' said he, to himself. 'And yet I ain't so sure. What better would she be if she did see it? I don't know as she ain't reckonin' her chickens up the right way, after all. Well, well, they all do it, in the 'ighest fam'lies, as I tell that boy Davis!'

Lavinia felt the snow bite shrewdly into her tender skin. Her shoes were low cut and thin, and the white murder iced her ankles and sent its venom through the useless soles of her footwear. The night wind had risen frosty, and the top crust of the snow surface was hard and brittle. She felt the sharp edge of it as her feet broke through the crust and the jagged frozen surface hurt her instep. The cold caught at her throat. Her worn, withered bosom shrunk almost level with her shoulder bones. But she did not shiver. She had come out with a definite purpose. She had no doubt that Davis had told the truth, but

she meant to see for herself. The footman had arranged the Venetians according to the orders she had given him when she sent for him the second time. She knew, of course, that this exposure to the night air and to the snow underfoot would kill her—probably kill her within forty-eight hours. Well, she had made up her mind that that would be the best way out of the trouble. It would be iniquitous to let Cradock marry his uncle's mistress (she did not know the story then in development of Harold Mortimer and Montague Bunch, which I have tried to tell in *Amazement*), and perhaps her 'Bub' was genuinely enamoured of the girl, and the girl of him. If so, she could do nothing better than die out of the way—and surely this was the best and least sensational way to die. For Lavinia hated sensation of all kinds, and knew that her carelessness would be allowed to account for this mad expedition of hers into the snow on this fatal night. She crept round the house till she came to the terrace in front of the library, and dividing the cedar lawn from the house. As she rounded the corner she saw that there were rays of light pouring out on to the snow and into the dark air of the night from the lights within the library. Davis had been able to arrange, then. Well, she hated herself for the meanness of her action, but she felt that, as a woman who was killing herself for the sake of love and honour, she was above conventional con-

siderations, and she *must* see. She knew that there might be nothing to see; that even if she found her husband and Fanny peacefully at work, that would prove nothing. A passion as long standing as Davis had led her to believe was the passion between her husband and her companion might very well take a rest now and then. But she would know by the mere carriage of the two. Ah! she knew already. Yes, she knew well enough, though she persuaded herself that she *must* have the personal evidence of her eyes.

How base she felt as she crept along! But how base he, her husband, had made her!

Between one of the slats of the blind and another there was a considerable space, but it was low down in the row of the blind and scarcely noticeable from within the room. Lavinia saw the place, and, shuddering with horror of herself rather than with the frightful cold which was now eating into her very existence, she hurried to the spy-hole.

Probably habit, use, long security, or fancied security, had made Bear and Fanny careless about the possibility of onlookers.

Lavinia stooped and peered through the space between the laths of the blind.

The library was quite clear to her for the greater part of its extent and she saw her husband and Fanny plainly enough.

'What's that?' said Fanny with a little frightened gasp.

'Nothing,' said Bear. 'Hush! Don't talk, my darling!'

Lavinia was found where she dropped in the snow, and it was close on midnight when they found her. It was not till Bear and Fanny had gone to bed that Lavinia's maid became anxious concerning the whereabouts of her mistress, and when she searched for her in her suite of rooms and could not find her she made shrill inquiry of other servants, and at last went anxiously to Bear's rooms. No. He had seen nothing of her. What! She could not be found in the house. Then he must go out and look for her. Let Crosse and Davis come with lanterns. No! Lanterns could not be necessary on so bright a night, with the glow of the snow on the ground. But, why should she have gone out? Where could she be? Did you see anything of your mistress, Crosse,' asked Bear of the butler, 'after dinner?'

'No, sir,' said Crosse respectfully. 'Suttin'ly not, sir.'

But Davis had rushed out of the front door from the hall and run, crying, into the snow, 'O ma'am! O ma'am!' he bellowed. 'O ma'am! I know! I know! I know!'

Bear paled a little. He had noticed the look of

aversion, of loathing, and scorn which the footman had cast upon him upon being summoned to look for his mistress.

‘He seems to be mad, Crosse,’ said Bear harshly to his butler. ‘Better follow him, or he may get into trouble.’

But before any one else had gone outside the hall door a great cry of a man in anguish thrilled through the night air. ‘Come! Oh, come, you hogs! You beasts, come! Come! she’s here! She’s dead! My mistress! O ma’am! O you brute, Bear! Come! Come! Oh, don’t be dead, ma’am. Don’t be dead. Let me warm your poor hands. Oh! how cold they are. How pale you are. But, wake! wake! wake! Oh, wake and see me cut the swine’s liver out!’

‘My God!’ said Bear. ‘No. Go back. You can be of no use yet,’ he said to Fanny, who was coming down the stairs, alarmed by the shouting of the footman. ‘I’ll let you know if you can be of any use later. Get hot blankets and water ready, and some spirits. Make the servants help you. We shall bring her in immediately. Davis has found her!’

Yes. Davis had found her lying where she fell. She had looked through the spy-hole, and seen. It was enough. She could not bear the shock to her heart. She fell on to the carpet of snow, and the carpet of snow warmed her, comforted her, dazed her poor, broken heart and her wearied, maddened brain.

Scarce sensible, she had cuddled into the fictitious warmth which snow gives. Her lungs were so diseased that it was only a matter of a few months how long she lived. But she had hoped to die with her children round her, yes, and her husband by her side. Where was she now? How cold, and yet how warm everything was. And how soft! But she was out doors. Ah, she must be delirious! They would not let her die out doors! It must be the fever, the fever of death, that was sending her such curious visions. But it was very comfortable. Yes. Very comfortable and warm. Yes. Very warm. Oh! How cold the sheets felt to her hand. Why, she *was* out doors. She could see the spreading cube of the great cedar. Ah! Good God! She remembered!

And then God, in His mercy, ordained that she remembered nothing more. She had been dead more than an hour when Davis found her.

CHAPTER XXI

THE CONSOLATION OF THE WIDOWER

It was characteristic of Fanny that when Lavinia's body was carried into the house she felt a thrill of triumph without the faintest remorse. Bear did not tell her where Davis had discovered the half-frozen corpse of his mistress, but Fanny made a good guess. The woman was so eaten up with her sordid ambition that the feelings of an ordinary human person scarcely affected her at all. All she saw was that another obstacle had been removed from her path of triumph, and that she now had victory before her—if she played her cards with anything like her ordinary skill. She certainly was not going to allow any stupid emotion to handicap her. The post she coveted, the post of Robert Bear's wife, was vacant. The sooner she filled it the better. There should be no false delicacy to prevent her from taking time by the forelock and striking while the iron was hot.

For once she found Bear sullen and taciturn with her. Brute, coarse-natured and mannered as the wealthy spice merchant was, the tragedy of Lavinia's

death affected him more than it affected Fanny. For one thing he feared that there might be an inquest to face, and he could not be certain what Davis would say if he were called upon to give evidence, or if he insisted on doing so. And although Bear was prepared in his rough-and-ready way to override all ideas of conventional or ethical decency, he did not wish to make himself a byword among the Nonconformist nations. He knew that he would not be able to retain the respect of his intimates, but he hoped that he would still be able to humbug the public.

The local doctor said that Lavinia had been dead an hour before he examined her remains. Everything had been done to bring her back to life which could be done. When she had fully satisfied herself that she was past recovery Fanny had been especially prominent in her attempt to revivify the dead body. The doctor had long treated her for phthisis, and he knew the opinion of the great Harley Street specialist whom the deceased lady had consulted upon his advice. He was prepared to give a certificate. No. He did not think that an inquest was at all necessary.

Bear was the great man of the neighbourhood, and although unpleasant rumours began to circulate as to the cause of poor Lavinia's expedition into the snow, hatless, in her thin shoes, without any covering save her evening frock, no one was bold enough to tackle him on the subject.

It was thought strange that Fanny should have remained in the house after the death of its mistress. But Bear had begged her to do so, and she was very reluctant to leave. The two D'Esterres and a few relatives of the dead woman came to the funeral, Harold Mortimer and the Swallows attended at the church without going to The Oaks. George alone of her sons followed her. Cyrus and Eddie had been unable to get back in time. And their father did not press them to return, but sent Cyrus another thousand pounds in case he might require it. The whereabouts of Cyrus were not definitely known, nor had anything been heard of his marriage. But he got the thousand pounds and the news of his mother's death, and decided that after he had paid one more visit to Chicago he would bring his wife home to England. He was not likely to be back until March at the earliest and wrote to his father and said so. The shock of his mother's death had fallen on him with less weight than it would have done in his bachelor days. As yet he lived in a dream of uxorious delight—and Niobe was a girl who might have held any man under the spell of Aphrodite for a space.

Ralph and Cradock stayed at The Oaks on the night of the funeral. George preferred to return to town with Harold Mortimer. He meant to 'have it out' with his father at a later date. The more he saw of Fanny Butler the more he disliked her. But the night

of his mother's funeral was no time for a family row. His father let him go back to town without attempting to dissuade him. Despite his callousness the man did not feel comfortable in the presence of his son. Despite his self-deception and pretence that he had done nothing of which he had any cause to be ashamed he knew his vileness, though he crushed his knowledge down, till at the last it was smothered in the intense self-satisfaction of his Nonconformist conscience.

Cradock had noticed something strange in Fanny's manner on the night of the funeral. When he attempted the usual lover's caress she had repulsed him, saying that it was no time for foolery. He had asked her when she was going to return to Trawlhaven, and said to his uncle that he feared that the marriage must be postponed for at least six months out of respect to dear Aunt Lavinia. He had thought Bear's reception of his words curious. But then he could hardly expect his uncle's manner to be normal at such a time of stress.

Fanny kept out of his way the next morning, and he returned to town with Ralph without having seen her. Ralph was quiet as usual, but there was a sadness about him which showed how he had really loved his aunt, and there was also, every now and then, a hard twinkle in his blue eyes which Cradock read as the light of amusement at something or other.

'What is it, Ralph?' he asked, in his fidgety manner,

when he had caught the light glimmering on him for the sixth time. 'What are you laughing at?'

'I'm not laughing, my dear boy,' said Ralph. 'At the most it's a ventral chuckle. Our young Trawl-haven friend is a-going of it, isn't she? Did you notice how naturally she took the end of the table at dinner last night? Bet you three to one, my boy, you never marry her! No, no, old man! I'm not chaffing, and I don't want to hurt you. What I am saying, I am saying in my own peculiar way for your own good. Can't you see what she is after? My God! I wish we knew all that had happened at The Oaks during the past few weeks. That fellow Davis had something he wished to say—but I never encourage servants to gossip. But Crad, old man, you mustn't be offended if I tell you it will be a good riddance for you if she *does* break it off.'

'Oh, rot! said Cradock; 'you are always seeing mysteries where no one else sees them, and where there are none to be seen. Of course she took the end of the table. She was the only lady there. And of course she is a bit upset. As for what has been going on at The Oaks, I should think you know the old routine of that house as well as I do.'

'Yes,' said Ralph. 'But not the new routine! We neither of us know that; and believe me, my dear old man—but it's no good talking. You'll hear something to your advantage in a day or two, or I'm a Dutchman.'

He buried himself in his morning paper and refused to renew the conversation till Liverpool Street was reached.

Lavinia's funeral had taken place three days before Christmas. And Fanny knew that she must make her move at once. Bear did not go up to town the day following the funeral, and Fanny put herself in his way soon after the D'Esterres had left the house.

'Will you order the carriage to take me to the station to-day, please, Bob?' she said. 'You know I can't go on staying here as Cradock's future wife any longer. It would be a bit too thin, you know, wouldn't it?'

She put her head on one side and smiled up in his face. Her hair had now grown long enough to be done up and massed on her head with the help of sundry transformations, and other fancy capillary additions.

'You're not going to leave me, Fanny,' said Bear. 'I won't let you. I'm not used to being contradicted, so you may as well resign yourself to staying here.'

'But, my dear man,' said Fanny, with a pout, 'what will my people at home think? You forget that they know that Mrs. Bear is dead! I can't go on staying here without a chaperon. As it is, I have compromised myself unless Cradock marries me quick. He! he! he!'

'You tantalising little devil!' said Bear, who was never himself or master of himself with this woman, this one woman of all the world, who could rouse the

savage in him, 'you shan't marry Cradock. You shall marry me, and that without any delay. Come—come with me to the library—we've been there before, you know——'

'Oh!' said Fanny; 'don't—don't talk like that now. It's enough to bring down bad luck on us. You know, I shall always believe that she saw us that night! How terrible it was!'

'It's no use brooding on things that have happened,' said Bear. 'What we've got to do is to be as happy as we can for the rest of our lives. If she did see us, it's just as well that the end came when it did. There might have been the greatest unpleasantness for us both to go through if she had lived. Come along, Fanny. Don't be silly and sentimental. Come with me into the library. I'll tell you what you've got to do when we get there.'

'Oh, you know I can never resist you,' said Fanny, laying her hand on his arm, and giving his flesh a little pinch.

They went into the room which had seen so much of the tragi-comedy of Fanny's love-affairs. 'Now,' said Bear, 'just you sit down in your usual seat, and write to Cradock to break off the engagement. You can't marry any one but me, and you know it; and the sooner he understands that the better for us all.'

'Why should I break it off?' asked Fanny, intending to spur the man on to binding himself more

definitely than he had done hitherto. 'You forget I'm a poor girl and must make my own career.'

'Oh, don't be silly,' said Bear, with something of his natural brusqueness and discourtesy. 'You've got to marry me next week. I'll get a special licence, and we'll be married at the church here, if you like, or at any registrar's. The parson won't make a fuss. He'll do what I tell him though I'm not a churchman. He gets too much money out of me to dare to offend me. Besides he's legally bound to marry any one who asks him with a licence in the proper form. But that will be as you like. If you'd rather go to a registrar's, I don't care. But marry me you must.'

'Listen,' said Fanny, peeping roguishly out of her slanting eyes. 'I *must* have something to show my people at home or I must leave here. If I write by this post breaking off my engagement with Crad, will you write to mother or father and tell them we are to be married almost at once?'

'Yes,' said Bear. 'Certainly. I don't mean to back out, if that's what you're afraid of.'

It was what she was afraid of, but she denied any such thought with pretty vehemence.

'Now then,' she said, sitting down to the table and dipping her pen in the ink; 'if you'll tell me what to write to Cradock, I'll tell you what to write to mother.'

'A fair exchange, eh?' smiled Bear in his heavy,

stolid way, with his dark eyes blinking and twinkling behind his wide-lensed gold-rimmed spectacles.

‘Very good. I’ll dictate, Miss Fanny. Begin, please: “Dear Cradock, I hope it won’t pain you to know that I have learnt that I do not love you as your wife ought to love you. I know you and Ralph will think me very weak and silly——”’

‘Oh I say, Bob,’ said Fanny, ‘you need not rub it in too hard.’

‘My dear girl you must play the modest, regretful maiden,’ said Bear. ‘Continue, if you please, er—er——“weak and silly——”’

‘I like your impudence,’ said Fanny.

‘I know you do, dear,’ said Bear, kissing her.

‘Oh, don’t ruffle my hair,’ said Fanny. ‘Well, go along. We shall never get done.’

“—and I can never express my regret too earnestly for having deceived not only myself but you and Ralph. After all, perhaps I am making a mountain out of a molehill, and you will be only too pleased to be rid of your engagement. I thought you were a little queer yesterday. If so I shall be glad, for I don’t want you to feel any pain at all.”’

‘Don’t you think I can dictate a pretty girl’s letter, Fanny?’ asked Bear with a dry smile. ‘Now, go ahead. “To be quite frank with you, I have at last found a man whom I really love. There can be no mistake about it. I will let you know when I am

married, which will be very shortly. Think of me as well as you can. I shall always hope for your happiness, and"—yes, by Jove, tell him the truth—"and your Uncle Robert, who is going to marry me next week, says that he will do his best to help you in every way."

'That's rather brutal, Bob, isn't it?' asked Fanny with the end of her pen in her mouth. 'It's like bribing him to give me up.'

'Oh, let it go,' said Bear impatiently. 'After all, what does it matter? We shall have a bit of a fight with most people, so why should we sham more than we can help. I must make it up to him somehow. There, sign it how you like.'

'And now for mother,' said Fanny, getting out of her chair and handing the pen to Bear. 'Please begin. He! he! he! I've never dictated to you before.'

'I hope you won't do it too often in the future,' said Bear ominously. He did not know how much dictation he would hear in after days. He knew himself to be strong, and thought himself stronger than any woman who might try to influence him. Men often make similar mistakes. The strongest of us can be bent like a reed by a woman who has the trick of it.

"Dear Mrs. Butler, I dare say you have wondered why Fanny has not returned to Trawlhaven now that Mrs. Bear no longer needs her as a companion." That's good, Bob, I think, don't you?'

'Yes, that will do,' said Bear, driving away in his small level-lined straggling letters, which at a distance looked like a straight line and a twizzle at the end, so tiny were the undulations.

'“The fact is,”' continued Fanny, dictating, “that I find that I cannot do without her. She was so kind and helpful during the lifetime of my poor invalid wife—” That's all right, isn't it?' asked the woman, with an abominable chuckle.

'It will do very well indeed,' replied Bear, driving away with his pen.

'“—that she has—” Has what, Bob? Say something nice, please.'

'“—has crept into my heart,”' read Bear as he wrote down the words. ‘“It may,”' he continued to read as he wrote, ‘“seem to you a little astonishing that she should care for a man of my age, but she assures me that she does, and I know that I should be quite at a loss without her. So we have decided to let convention go to the dogs and get married at once. She is writing by this post to my nephew Cradock informing him of her decision, and we hope that in time everything will be proved to have happened for the best.”'

'I say, Bob,' said Fanny, 'that's rather a large order, isn't it? It reads as if the death of your late lamented wife might prove for the best.'

'Oh, I can't bother about that,' said Bear. 'Perhaps

it was. She was always as dull as ditch-water for the last years of her life. Now, my dear, is there anything else you want me to say?’

The fact of this austere man being able to speak in this way was a marvel in itself. But we never know ourselves, far less our neighbours. For the time being Bear was as giddy of mood, as irresponsible of temperament as a youth of twenty. He had never been young before. He took his disease of youth late in life, and he took it badly. Never before had he been other than a taciturn, sullen person with a great show and a great reality of what he considered to be moral rectitude. The old Adam, so long imprisoned, had burst forth at last. He was younger than any one of his sons. And when this kind of youth comes to a man of middle age the audience of the human comedy, the watchers on the seats of destiny, hold their sides with laughter.

“Of course it would never do for your daughter to remain under my roof unless we were to be married immediately. Even as it is, it may excite remark.”

‘Yes,’ said Fanny, with a laugh, ‘I think you may say it will do that. But I don’t care,’ she added, fondling his hair. ‘Do you?’

‘Not a bit,’ said Bear. Then he went on with his letter. “But we shall be married next week, and then it will be a matter of perfect indifference both to your daughter and myself what people say. I am sorry—”

Ha, ha!—"I am sorry that I cannot ask you to attend our wedding, but naturally we wish it to be as quiet as possible. However, we shall hope to see you soon. Either we will run down to Trawlhaven or I will ask—" I say, Fanny, do you want your mother here?"

'No,' said Fanny, 'no. She is better at Trawlhaven.'

"—will ask Mrs. Ford to visit us," said Bear, with a chuckle. "In the meantime, and always, I remain, yours sincerely."

'There!' he said, 'how will that suit you?'

Fanny flung her arms round his neck and kissed him. She wished to keep him impassioned for the present. 'You dear!' she cried. 'You shall see. It may sound horrid to say so. But you shall see that it has all happened for the best.'

And Bear, still infatuated, believed her.

CHAPTER XXII

STILL CLIMBING

THE marriage was celebrated at a registrar's; but there was no secrecy about it. In less than a fortnight after Lavinia had been laid in her grave in the village churchyard, the *Times* contained the announcement that Robert Bear of The Oaks, and of 127 Mincing Lane, of the firm of Bear and Sons, had married Frances Butler, daughter of Thomas and Sophia Butler of Trawlhaven, in the county of Daneshire.

It is no part of this story to tell of the scandal which the announcement of the event caused. The affairs of our woman of character have taken up so much time and space already, that it is necessary to detail the rest of her career to the present time in as brief a manner as is possible; and, after all, I fancy whatever gaps may be left in the story will be easily enough filled in by my readers for themselves.

Fanny's greatest anxiety, after her marriage was an accomplished fact, was concerning the influence which Cyrus Bear might have over his father. When Cyrus

returned with an unexpected wife, she knew that the pool was hers. Cyrus had to excuse himself, and Robert Bear, without making an actual bargain of it, let his eldest son know that his acceptance of Niobe as his daughter-in-law would depend upon the manner in which Fanny was treated by Cyrus.

To do Niobe justice, she would have preferred to engage in open warfare with Fanny. She had her faults, but she was an honest, straightforward woman, and the tale which met her on her landing at Southampton infuriated her. She had learned to love her husband's mother from his report of that dear woman; and, woman like, she read between the lines of the story as it was told her, and understood the sufferings under which Lavinia had given way. She consented, in order to please Cyrus, to stay a week at The Oaks, and to treat Fanny with such courtesy as she could find for her. She thought that she was a match for Fanny, but Fanny soon showed her her mistake.

Cyrus did not get home before the middle of March, and then on his father's invitation went straight to The Oaks. It happened that George had also been constrained to put in a few days at home for the purpose of raising funds. Since Robert Bear's second marriage, his children by Lavinia found that if they wanted cash they had to hold a candle to unrighteousness in the shape of Fanny, and to give some ostensible

evidence of their acceptance of her as their step-mother. Now it cannot be denied that Niobe was such a flirt as was seldom seen. She was perfectly harmless and innocent in her flirtations, but the way in which she led young George on to grovel at her feet gave Fanny a weapon against her, and it was at Bear's request that Cyrus took his wife to the home which his father was willing to arrange for him. Bear was not ungenerous in his settlements; but Fanny had had her say as to the terms of the covenants, and it was agreed that in the event of the death of Cyrus without issue, practically nothing would go to his widow.

Herein chance favoured the woman of character. Two years after the return of the eldest son his wife was still childless, whereas Fanny had already increased the Bear family by two stalwart boys. It is unnecessary to specify the date of the birth of the first-born of the second marriage. Of course there are such things as six months' children, but these are rarely so stout and healthy as was Augustus, the first of the issue born of the second marriage.

And from the birth of this boy Fanny's ambition took on a viler form. Why, she thought, should Lavinia's children be preferred before hers? Yet she knew that so long as the three eldest sons lived, her children would share but poorly in the vast accumulations of wealth which Robert was heaping up.

It became impossible for Niobe and Fanny to meet.

Niobe was long-suffering, but when Fanny consoled with her on her being a barren stock, extolling her own virtues, and at the same time saying, 'But then, you see, Bob's such a splendid breeder!' Niobe made up her mind that never again would she meet that woman on terms of not friendship, but even tolerance.

Fanny thought and thought. Her children must inherit. They should. Cyrus and his wife no longer came to The Oaks. Even when, during the second year of her marriage, she persuaded her husband to set up a huge town establishment at Prince's Gate, Niobe refused to accept the invitations which, at first, Bear insisted should be sent to her.

She could not cause a quarrel between Cyrus and his wife. At any time a child might be born and then indeed her, Fanny's, children would have their noses put out of joint worse than ever. What could she do?

It was useless to stir up trouble between Cyrus and his father. Cyrus and George were both now regular partners in the firm, and, in addition, the settlement which Bear had made upon Cyrus and his issue was irrevocable, even if it was post-nuptial. There was the chance of George's marriage. That would mean another slice of her husband's fortune deflected from her and her children. Formerly Fanny was ambitious for herself alone, and she was then a less vile woman than she became when she was influenced by maternity.

It is a curious paradox that a woman's best instincts may develop her most evil passions. Fanny was now hungry and eager, not only for her own advancement in the world, as she knew it, but for the future splendour of her offspring. And she was not a woman to sit patient under what she conceived to be her wrongs or the wrongs of those dear to her.

And as the mother sat and thought a terrible hope a vile intention came to her. It showed itself to her in all its horror when first it taunted her with its possibility. When, owing to her treachery, Lavinia had gone to her death, it had not been through any direct action of Fanny's. Fanny did not know that Davis had betrayed her relations with Bear, did not know that Lavinia intended to creep outside the library on that fatal night and spy to her own destruction. Her comfortable conscience had never troubled her over much owing to that tragedy. Nor would it continue to worry her when once she got used to this new idea which made her head throb and her heart beat thick and hard.

This morning she held in her hand a letter which she had just received from an old friend of hers who lived in the little fishing-village of Beaconham, a pretty little spot on the Daneshire coast, which was becoming popular with summer visitors, but was not yet entirely spoilt by the regularity of their advent. 'It is dreadful,' wrote the girl, 'and we dare not let

outsiders know of it, or it would spoil the summer season. But there have already been twenty serious cases, and there is no sign of the epidemic decreasing. The drains have always been bad where there were any, and the doctor says that since we have had so many summer visitors, the village folk have kept too many fowls. If this awful diphtheria cannot be checked, I fear the consequences may be appalling.'

'Lucy always was fond of big words,' said Fanny, thinking. 'No outsider knows. And Bob was asking me this morning if I could recommend a sea-side place in my native county for Cyrus and George. Cyrus's wife isn't going, more's the pity. Her people are coming over, and she is to meet them at Southampton and take them down to Daneshire. But not till Cyrus has had a fortnight there first. I wonder. I wonder. I'll risk it anyway. But Lucy must not be there. I'll ask her up here and keep her mouth shut by telling her that Bob would never let her come if he knew she came from such a pest-stricken place. Yes. That will do. Why should my darlings suffer for being children of a second marriage?'

She tore up her friend's letter and carefully burnt the pieces. Then she wrote a letter to her, asking her up, and begging her not to breathe a word of the epidemic, or Bear would never permit her to set foot under his roof. Both sons had been ill, and wanted a change and sea air.

That night Fanny said to her husband, 'You were asking me this morning if I knew of a nice quiet place for Cyrus and George to stay for a bit, where they could get sailing and that. I don't think they could do better than go to Beaconham. It's magnificent air, there are plenty of sailing beach boats, and there ought to be some mackerel fishing now.'

'A good idea, Fanny,' said Bear. 'I've heard of it before. I'll tell Cyrus in the morning. He hates the regular society summer resort, you know, and likes a place where he can wear shorts all day. From what I've heard, Beaconham will be the very place for him and George.'

So it fell about that while Niobe remained in town to await the arrival of her mother from Chicago, her husband and her brother-in-law went down to diphtheria-stricken Beaconham.

When Fanny had once made up her mind that it was her proper course in her own interests, and in the interests of her children, to send the two young fellows into imminent danger of their lives, her conscience did not trouble her further in the matter. She entertained as brilliantly as ever, she bore a cheerful face to all the world. The woman was so wrapt up in herself, in her own prospects, and in those of her children, that all ethical considerations which did not affect them favourably seemed to her to be of no account. I suppose that such frightful self-concentration is a

form of mania, but it is not an uncommon form, though, perhaps, few women or men are prepared to carry it so far as did Fanny.

It did not cause her to relent to think that Eddie, the third boy, was in a dangerous state of health, and that the last accounts from the Engadine left but little hope of his ever seeing England again. The boy had returned home twice since his father's second marriage, but had spent most of his time with Cyrus and his wife, and Fanny hardly took him into consideration save as an incumbrance which there was every hope of having removed by a merciful providence. It did not worry her in the least to think that if he died, and Cyrus and George fell victims to her abominable machinations, her husband would be left without any child by his first wife. Rather, when she did think of it, she glowed with exultation. She even dared the blasphemy of imagining that Providence was playing into her hands. If she could get rid of Cyrus and George before either of them perpetuated his race, she and her children would soon be the only heirs for her husband's wealth.

If her action had been suggested to her in the old days of Trawlhaven, I think she would have recoiled from it with horror. Her vileness had thrived on success. Had not her hunger of ambition been whetted rather than satiated by the food convenient for it, she might have lived and died a commonplace,

respectable provincial woman, as harmless and futile as her sister Nellie, as vulgar and mean in hope as her mother. But from her first meeting with Ralph, everything seemed to her to have gone right with her schemes. To others, regarding the succession of events and her development of character more philosophically, it may seem as if everything had gone terribly wrong. Cribbed, cabined, and confined in a provincial town, where her opportunities of mischief would have been comparatively inconsiderable, she might have lived out her life free of any actual crime. I do not say on her soul, because her soul (if there is such a thing, and she had one) felt no weight of crime. She might have married some shopkeeper or fish-salesman, and come to look on screaming gossip at her acquaintances in the electric trams as the highest possible social delight. She might even have died in the odour of extreme respectability, for if she brightened her life with any irregularities (as even provincial women must sometimes do, poor things), she was so clever that no one would have found her out. There are some, oh yes! a good many of her kind to be found now. But she has gone to spheres above, to that 'far serener clime' of metropolitan society, and to a life which has meant death to at least three, and may mean something worse than death to herself.

Cyrus and George had no difficulty in getting lodgings. At that time there was no hotel at Beaconham,

but more than one decent house 'took lodgers,' or as Nellie Ford and Mrs. Butler would, perhaps, have preferred to put it, 'entertained a few visitors during the summer.'

No one in Beaconham would have dared to warn the young fellows that an epidemic was prevalent in the village. *Esprit de corps*, the good of the village, self-interest, all forbade. It was as yet early in the season—the middle of June, to be precise—and every one in Beaconham hoped fervently that before July came there would be no more diphtheria. The house to which Cyrus and his brother went was free from the scourge, and situated at some distance from any case. Surely, surely the good folk who kept the house were not called on to throw away good 'brass.'

In less than a week after their departure from London, Cyrus was down with the disease, and in less than ten days George contracted it. In less than three weeks both were dead.

When Fanny saw the great grief which came on her husband from the loss of his two eldest born, she was glad that she had sent them to their doom. That grief, that abandonment of sorrow, told her that they would have had an even greater influence in the business, an even greater slice out of the fortune than she had suspected. Bear himself hardly knew how he loved his sons till he lost them. Of course his passion for Fanny had not survived his marriage for

long, and, of course, there were times when he looked back with regret on the madness which had seized him. But, like a wise man, he made the best of things, and for the sake of a quiet life gave his wife a free hand and as much money as she wanted. But the loss of Cyrus and George took his thoughts back to Lavinia more frequently than they had strayed to her at any time since her death. He became morose, taciturn, more like the man he had been before he changed under the magnetic charm of Fanny.

But Fanny exulted. She sympathised with her husband prettily in his presence, but when she was by herself, she could not keep the light of triumph from her eyes. Ah! she had fought for her little ones, and victory was hers.

Before the end of the summer, Eddie had followed his brothers, and there was no more of Lavinia's stock left on this earth.

Fanny had come to her own. She was the mother of the future king of the firm and the fortune. She and her children were now Bear's first cares. No longer had she to wonder how much would go to Cyrus or his children, how much to George or his children, how much to Eddie. All was hers and her children's. Verily her fight and her daring had been great, but great was her triumph. She was far too clever to exhibit her delight; far too clever to trail, metaphorically, the bodies of the vanquished behind

her triumphant chariot. No one could have been more sympathetic, more solicitous, more tender than she was with her husband.

And she has her reward. Every year she makes a greater display of the wealth which she aimed to win. Every year her importance in the London world looms larger. It is true that the county set never called at The Oaks, and that, though a few bachelors and rather raffish men about town (who regard sport before decency) help Bear to shoot his pheasants, no ladies of any social standing in the neighbourhood consent to know the second Mrs. Bear. But Fanny reckes little of that. Trawlhaven has wearied her of provincialism, even of the county sets. It is London that she loves to have at her feet, London that she exults to have conquered. And the receptions and various functions of the Prince's Gate House are now some of the best advertised features of the season, and filled with some of the best-known society people.

Her box at the opera is as brilliant as any in the grand circle, and her diamonds are hardly surpassed even in the wondrous barbaric ornament show on a Melba night.

And Bear grows richer and richer. There are now six children by the second marriage, but his millions will be enough to make financial magnates of a dozen. He himself is more subdued, more reserved than he was, and as time goes on he reverts more to his former

mannerisms, those roughnesses of bearing, those uncouth silences, which he had changed when Fanny came into his life. Whether he ever thinks of Lavinia with regret, he alone knows. Whether he ever loathes himself and his wife for what took place under the roof of The Oaks during the life of that sweet woman, who can tell but he? No one suspects Fanny of her greatest infamy,—if, indeed, that was her greatest infamy—her indirect murder of Cyrus and George. She has practically forgotten that she was responsible for it. Her success in society is greater than might have been expected, for in these days her vulgarity passes as eccentricity, or is so common as to excite no remark. It depends on the class who judge her. There are many even more vulgar than she, but few more wealthy, and therein lies her secret.

She has grown the handsomer with years and prosperity. Her face has filled out, her bust developed, and her collar-bones been covered with a decent cushion of flesh and fat. She dresses magnificently, and her swathes of black hair crown her sparkling visage with a dignity which was lacking when she was close-cropped. To see her at the end of her dinner-table, or standing at the head of the staircase on a grand reception night, no one would guess that she had risen from the position of the daughter of a provincial boarding-house keeper, had risen by countless crimes, immoralities, and vilenesses, by treachery,

adultery, faithlessness, deception, and murder, to be the queen of society that she is. Gradually her life is slipping apart from her husband's. He cares little for the superb functions which are the joy of her heart, and though sometimes he may take the chair at the dinner of a city company, or give a lecture on the advantages of free trade, he is sinking into the background, ready to give way to the children of Fanny, when they shall be of an age to oust him. Sullen and taciturn as he is again, and as he formerly was, he has lost the old power, the old capacity, of commanding respect which once was his. His nephews (who have obtained a decent allowance because Fanny desired them to keep their tongues quiet concerning her past) rarely see him, and when they do they are beginning to pity him. The *History of Unitarianism* is still unfinished.

A small cloud has arisen upon the marital felicity of Bear and Fanny. Fanny insists that her husband could buy a title if he offered enough, and urges him to do so for the sake of her eldest boy. But Bear has no use for a title, and doubts if it is worth the money. He says that a peerage would cost him at least £200,000, and that in a few years money will ignore purchased rank altogether. How the quarrel will end can only be surmised. But Fanny has never been beaten yet, and the likelihood seems to be that either Bear will soon tack Baron on his name, or his life will

become either uncomfortable or unnecessary to Fanny. And we know that she has no great reverence for unnecessary life.

How she will end it is impossible to predict. The effects of old age on any woman must be purely a matter of speculation. But, despite the demands of justice, it is to be hoped that she will not become religious and insist on a public confession of her crimes. The moral effect of such a disclosure would be too awful. It would be far better to let her die in triumph, an example of the inestimable possibilities of a woman of character.

Bear has never identified his wife with the woman to whose appearance he had at first sight taken exception, and the D'Esterres have been generous and shrewd enough to refrain from enlightening him.

After all, Fanny may fairly claim to be a satisfactory wife, as wives go, and is certainly a most admirable mother.

CHAPTER XXIII

TRAWLHAVEN OPINION

It was during the season of the second summer after the deaths of the three eldest sons of the spice-merchant that Nellie Ford read an account in the London notes of the *Trawlhaven Journal*, and read it aloud (with bitterness and assumed derision) to her Florance.

Florance was in no good mood. He and his father had been endeavouring to turn their business into a limited liability company. But both of them were too provincial to make much of a hand at it. They were at once too honest and too simple to succeed. They trusted their lawyers and brokers, their underwriters and their proposed promoters, more than the idiocy of the public, and herein made as big a mistake as they could when appealing to the public for money. They gave the true profits of their business in the prospectus, and did not show the prospective profits which might arise after the increase of capital incidental on the issue of shares and debentures. They were absolutely straight in their

figures and even cautious to err, if at all, on the wrong side. Instead of asking for a million, a sum large enough to command attention, they asked for a fifth of that sum—too petty a business for any one of importance or for the mighty public to put trust in. It is better to steal a million than to try to get a couple of hundred thousand honestly; better, that is, for the chances of success. They had applied to Robert Bear for his assistance, but, acting on Fanny's advice (she now wished to cut loose from all associations with Trawlhaven), he declined to touch the matter. And the company had fizzled out, and things had gone on in the old way.

'Just listen here, dear,' said Nellie, who had grown more commonplace and foolish with every year. 'What will Fanny be doing next?'

'Damn Fanny!' mumbled Florance, in spite of the presence of three of his children who had now attained an age to enjoy hearing their father swear—an age which comes early to most boys. 'If that old brute Bear—and he *is* a bear—ha! ha!' (no joke is more popular in the provinces than one on a man's name!) —'would have given us a decent lift in the city, we should be worth another fifty thousand at least, and I should be drawing my three thousand a year as managing director without having to do half the work I have to do now. I wish Fanny had never picked up with that lot on the pier (as you have told me she

did) like any blooming tart! Why, Nellie, you know that's what she did. She simply picked up one nephew on the regatta night and got engaged to him. Then he called off, and she hooked the other; and then, blowed if the old man wasn't fool enough to be landed! But she might at least have remembered to whom she owed her success. If we had never asked those idiots to dinner and given her the hall-mark of a connection with us, she would never have brought off her coup. And yet when I want old Bear's good offices in the city for our company, he says he can't do anything or say anything about a matter he knows nothing of. Why, hang it! last year we did over fifty thousand with him alone! Confound her and Bear and the whole boiling of 'em!

Florance was in an exceptionally truculent mood, because on the previous day he had taken out an extremely pretty married woman for a spin in the Panhard (a new car, a delightful 15-20 touring car), and though he started with high hopes of her facility of disposition and readiness to oblige, he had found that she was not, at any price, willing to be his toy. He had, moreover, met an acquaintance motoring in the town whither he had taken the lady, and he was by no means sure that his escapade (and a fruitless one at that) might not come to his wife's ears.

'Oh, *do* listen!' cried Nellie; 'I *must* show this to Dr. Ap Jones and Lieutenant Marshall. Listen. "It

is a matter for considerable pride among us good patriots of the town of Trawlhaven that one of the brightest stars of the London Society firmament this brilliant season should have hailed from our bracing and genial shores. No more superb function has been seen for years than the dinner and *musical* to which Mrs. Robert Bear, the lovely wife of the great commercial prince, Robert Bear, invited the very *élite* of Mayfair last Tuesday night. Mrs. Bear, as all Trawlhaven people will remember with some satisfaction, was a Miss Frances Butler, the daughter of our esteemed fellow-townsmen, the well-known artist, Thomas Butler, and the sister of Mrs. Florance Ford, the wife of that energetic gentleman who, with the experienced assistance of his father, Alderman William Ford, has done so much to increase the prosperity and popularity of our beautiful town.'

'Well,' interpolated Florance, 'at all events, the joker don't say anything of the Pontine Boarding Establishment, and that's something to be thankful for.'

'Oh, you're always harping on that, Florance,' said Nellie. 'It's perfectly absurd. If it wasn't for mother, and people like her, you wouldn't sell half the potted stuff in the town, I'm sure. You ought to be very grateful that there are boarding-houses.'

'Oh, that's all right!' said Florance. 'Only I don't want 'em in my back garden.'

Nellie tossed her head impatiently and continued to

read. 'Those present at the dinner were the Duke and Duchess of Saxonfield, the Marquis and Marchioness of Contango, the Earl of Solebay and Lady Ann Flounder, the Earl and Countess of Whitefriars, the Earl and Countess of Bouverie, Lord Salimaltanhops and the Honourable Miss Eugénie Salimaltanhops, Sir Patrick Bacon of Sligo Castle and Lady Bacon, and Mr. Mail, the famous Chicago meat-packer, with the beauty of the season, his daughter, Miss Mamie Mail. All were brilliant. But most brilliant of all, I am assured by not the least eminent person present at that almost regal repast, was the hostess, our fellow-townswoman, whose magnificent parure and necklace of diamonds, the latter worn in silver settings against plain black velvet, even "took the shine" (I quote the witty remark of Mr. Mail) "out of Miss Mamie's emeralds." At the *musical*, held in the superb double drawing-rooms, furnished throughout by Messrs. Staple and Owldred in the style of Louis XVI. and quite regardless of expense, as is everything in this wonderful mansion, Madame Bilba delighted the ears of the most fastidious. Even Royalty, accompanied by the Duke of South Roads, who is reported to have furnished a very considerable accommodation in a certain quarter before obtaining the dukedom, did not disdain to be present—but hush! If his Highness desired to enjoy the brilliant spectacle and priceless singing (and there is a whisper that Madame Bilba's fee ran to four

figures!) incognito, it is not for one of his most obedient and loyal servants to "give the show away" (again to quote Mr. Mail, who became quite friendly with the representatives of the press, who were permitted into the side refreshment-room).

'Some comment was caused by the length of a conversation between the royal guest and the hostess. Rumours have been flying about that Mr. Bear will soon change that title for another of greater dignity. But those who know him best deny that the millionaire has any intention of seeking the peerage to which his commercial importance in the country fully entitles him.'

'Oh, dry up, for Heaven's sake!' cried Florance. 'If that's the sort of flapdoodle they are going to give us in the *Journal*, I shall withdraw all our advertisements. It's absolutely sickening!'

'But how lovely for Fanny!' sighed Nellie.

'Good God!' murmured Florance.

'I think she might ask us up now and then. Don't you, dear?' asked Nellie.

'I think she'd better not, unless her rotter of a husband means to give our company a lift next year,' said Florance, 'or she and he might both hear something they didn't like!'

He went out into the tiny hall and put on his hat. 'I shan't be in to lunch,' he said, coming back for a moment to make the announcement.

When Nellie was left by herself she read the notice of the function through again, and she envied her sister with an envy mightier than she could express. Yet she felt a warmth from the fires of Fanny's glory, a radiated distinction from her sister's fame. 'I don't think I must let Dr. Ap Jones be *quite* so familiar for the future,' she said to herself. 'After all, it is something to be sister of Mrs. Robert Bear of Prince's Gate and of The Oaks. Besides, I am tired of him, and I'm awfully gone on Lieutenant Marshall in that delightful new gunboat.'

She gave her nurse orders as to her children, gave her cook orders as to the meals, bedecked herself for half an hour, and then started off to show her mother the notice of Fanny's splendour. She missed a tram, and began to walk down the High Street. She had not gone far when she met Saunders, the Hebrew slop-selling fish-salesman, who was hurrying up the hill, his lips puffed out, his face shining with perspiration, his ruby pin glistening less than his eyes. He was waving a copy of the *Trawlhaven Journal* frantically, and he stopped Nellie with a piteous gasp as soon as they reached each other.

'My tear Mrs. Fort!' he cried. 'Haf you seen dis? Und I met die laty in your house! No von haf more bedder sdonos vor sale as me! No von. Would you nod have thought I mighd sell some do her? And see now. De finest tiamonts in Lonton!'

‘Why, Mr. Saunders,’ said Nellie, ‘you quite startled me!’

‘It vos hardt!’ said Saunders. ‘I think your huspant might haf tolt me as her encachement mit Misder D’Esterre vos noddings. See! I am in Lonton four, fife, six years ako, and I meeds Misder D’Esterre. I haf some fine tiamonts recut in Amsterdam! Ah! famous stones dey vos in deir time! Recut and prilliant water. I offer him dem for die laty. It vos after I see de marriache announced. “See,” I say, “you haf invloocene mid die laty. All laties lof tiamonts. I gif you commission. See dese stones for von tausand pounts. You haf twenty? Vot!” But der younk tog he doog my arm and say, “Ach, my merry Misder Saunders. How vos you! Eh! You vant to sell sdolen chewels do my aunt by touple marriache! No! Gome and haf a trink!” he say. So, all for der sage of peezeness I haf a trink. He tage me do Gambrinu’s, an’ speag to der vaider, and I trink and I trink! But still he neffer gome do der peezeness. I peg him akain und akain. “Vill you dry do sell von, dwo, dree tausand vort of tiamonts do her? She vill pelief you, sair,” I say, dough I vould not on my life.

‘But he laugh and say, “Dere iss no pelief in her, my friendt. She vill not speag as she pass by! She vos a vunner,” he say, und she vill go far. Bud she vill nod puy my tiamonts. Bud, he say, he vill regomment

her do puy her feesh vrom der Lonton shop vich I sobbly! Bud no! no! no! I say. Der is no peezeess in dat. Sell her die tiamonts. He say haf anudder trink, and I had anudder, all for de sage of peezeess. Now, Matam, I ton't vant to insult nopoty nor to haf nopoty insult me. Pud dot younk D'Esterre he clap me on die back an' call me a vily old sheeny! Yah! in Gambrinu's vhere I toog a trink for der sage of toink peezeess. Und I see some beeble loog up and laugh. So I say, not to insult him, nor to be insulted by him, I say, "You tage me to der haus of your aunt and peg her to led me show her my chewels." And he say "No. Pud I vill tage you to der haus of my uncle." And I say, "Vary well, for of course it vill pe Misdair Pear who pay der monish." Put dat younk man he tage me to my friendt Attenborough's and say, "Dere you are. Now gif me die stones and I vill see vot he vill gif me on dem." Now, dot vos not peezeess, so I dell him qvite cross I do not vish him to insult me nor to insult him, and he call a cab and say he vill see me safe, and asg me if I vish do see der Chewish lant of Bromise. I thoughtd ad last he tage me to die aunt. Bot no. He tage me to Park Lane and show me der houses and say dere vos der land of promise. Den he leaf me, midout doink peezeess nod at all, and tell der cabman to drive to Ventvort' Street and leaf me do pay him. And now see here. It vos doo hardt. Unt I Gould have solt her dem tiamonts, ach!

den per shent sheep. Pud, Mrs. Fort, you are nod like dat younk man. Ven you wraite to your seester, tell her I haf some tiamonts! Oh, lofly stones, and sheep!’

Nellie thought that she would like a few stones for herself, or she would have left the simian little fish-salesman long before he had finished his plaint.

‘You might let *me* see a few, Mr. Saunders,’ said she. ‘And I will try to persuade my husband to buy me some.’

‘Bud loog ’ere!’ the Jew shouted. ‘Loog ’ere. Und I met der laty und de D’Esterres, und now she haf de lofly tiamonts und I sell dem not.’

‘Never mind,’ said Nellie. ‘I hope I shall have some.’ But I wonder,’ said she, ‘that you could get away from the market at this time.’

‘Oh, dot vos all raight,’ said the Jew. ‘My poy he shout vare well and can sell der trunks of feesh. He rink der pell peautiful, better as Mrs. Pear blayed der biano! Ah! moch bedder. Und den I to not hear vot der beeples say apout me vich vos not always naice, und I haf no vish to insult or to pe insulted. Goot mornink, Matam. I vill hope to sell you some peautiful stones.’

He turned and raced away in front of her back to the market, where he loved to stand, with his protuberant belly extended outside from the doorway of his office, his little pig eyes twinkling through his

glasses as he watched the boyish auctioneer endeavour to sell fish as well as his seniors and better paid rivals. The Jew was the master. He generally is when he gives his mind to it.

Presently Nellie heard a tram coming behind her. It was characteristic of her that although she condescended to ride in the public conveyance, she never failed to explain to any acquaintance she saw within it, that her husband had the Panhard out, and she really *had* to get down the town, and it was *so* hot, otherwise she did not often take a tram. However, when that explanation was over, she enjoyed the terrible feminine cackle which shrieks above the rattle of the tram lines as much as any old boarding-house keeper from South Point to North Edge.

And she saw upon the face of every woman in the car that she had read the notice in the *Trawlhaven Journal*. Most of them smiled, and then sniffed a little. They were not going to be patronised because Nellie Ford had a sister mentioned in the press who had been no better than she should be if all they heard were true.

‘Eh!’ said Mrs. Parrish, a short, stout, prominent-nosed woman, rather juvenile for her years, who was accompanied by two slimmer daughters cast in the same mould, but a little taller. ‘Eh! Fine doings at Prince’s Gate! I wonder you did not go up, my dear!’

Nellie coloured a little. ‘Florance couldn’t get

away,' she said; 'and I did not like to leave him. But of course there will be plenty of other opportunities now the time of mourning is well over. I believe that this is only the first of a series—at least so I hear.'

'Well, for my part,' said a white-haired, thin-cheeked woman, who raddled her old cheeks with carmine and French chalk, 'I never believed as any good would come out of a gal's marryin' so high above her. And look at what have happened! All them pore young fellers carried off one after the other, as if it was the judgment of God!'

'Oh, pray don't make yourself so ridik'lous,' said a comfortable, matronly-looking dame, with an air of prosperity all over her. 'I'm sure as the ladies of the Trawlhaven boarding-houses are good enough for anybody. I don't know where you'd find better breedin' or better eddication. And everybody knows that Mrs. Robert Bear was a beautiful player on the piano. Don't you agree with me, Mrs. Ford? Come to that, you've done as well for yourself as she has. I don't see any difference between the society standin' of Mr. Bear and Mr. Ford.'

'Eh! Eh!' laughed Mrs. Parrish, smiling unpleasantly. 'Perhaps Mrs. Bear would, though? But how does she behave, my dear?' she asked Nellie. 'I was only saying to my daughter Mirabel this morning, that I hoped she remembered where she came from,

for it is a distinction to entertain royalty, there's no doubt of that, and I think you ought to be proud, my dear.'

'Well, I don't hold with such nonsense, Mrs. Parrish,' said the painted lady.

'Well,' said Mrs. Parrish venomously, 'I can't see that the death of the three sons of the first marriage was any punishment for her. It makes it all the better for her and her children.'

'Ah! but it might ha' been meant for him!' persisted the painted lady. 'Look at Mrs. Bacup on the Front!'

And here all the elder women bent their heads forward and whispered shrilly, so that the conductor chuckled to himself and delayed asking for their money, for the details they gave were entertaining in the extreme.

Nellie had hardly recovered from the effect of the notice sufficiently to enter into the joyous conflict of tram gossip with her usual eagerness. She drew back, and looked about her with an air of arrogance for which she would have to pay when she left the tram.

'She's never been asked up at all to *my* knowledge,' said Mrs. Parrish, as soon as Nellie had got off near the Pontine Boarding Establishment. 'I was only saying so to my daughter this morning, wasn't I, Mirabel?'

'What, ma?' asked the girl, looking up from the

red-covered novel which she was taking home from Shoosmith's library.

'Why, that Nellie Ford didn't get much chance of seeing her sister's grandeur.'

'And I think it's a shame,' cried Mirabel, waking up. 'I think all London relations ought to remember their sisters or cousins in the country.'

'Why, my dear,' said the comfortable lady (who kept a large and well-paying boarding establishment herself), 'I don't see that London is any better than Trawlhaven. I'm sure the young fellows and the girls are as well dressed, and better behaved here than they are in London, if the papers tell the truth.'

But Mirabel turned up her nose (as well as she could elevate that somewhat aquiline member) and went on with her book. She, too, had character capable of development. Would she ever get the chance vouchsafed to Fanny Bear?

'My dear,' said Sophia Butler, as soon as she had kissed her elder daughter; 'now lettest thou thy mother depart in peace. My old eyes have seen the glory of the party of my daughter, and though Tom says it's all nonsense, I think he ought to have hoisted the ensign on the flag-post to-day, when there's all about it in the *Journal*. Bless you, my dear girl! She owes it to you. It was you that gave her her chance, and she ought never to forget it, though, of course, she's that high now as she can afford even to look down on William Ford.'

'It's only a matter of money,' said Nellie, feeling a little sore.

'That's it. And that's everything. That's what she played for and won. I don't understand all about her ways of getting there, and perhaps if I did I shouldn't exactly like 'em. But there you are. I never asked too close about her engagements or about her marriage. And how's it all ended? Don't tell me. Fanny always knew what she was about, and look what she's done for herself now!'

'Yes,' said Nellie thoughtfully. 'But it was sad that Dick Baldry drank himself to death.'

'She'd never have had him, my dear,' said the mother. 'Never in this world. No. Fanny was never meant for a common life. She *had* some character, she had.'

And then Nellie told her mother about Saunders and the diamonds, and the conversation strayed away from the heroine of this history, the heroine who had attained.

THE END

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